

The Pawns of Fear

Steve Summers, 'private eye' hero of Jason Manor's last book *The Red Jaguar*, finds his old fishing companion Billy Farrell dead under the pier of a Californian seaside resort. Is it really suicide, and what are the Committee of America Incorporated, a neo-fascist organization, really up to? Suspense is the key-note to Steve's subsequent investigations, suspense bound up with the lovely Laura Mason and the mysterious Mr. Black who is only seen when he takes his daily sunset walk along the beach; and the final climax—the opening of America Incorporated's first annual convention,—contains not only a startling denouement but a searing attack on the current American witch hunt.

Also by Jason Manor

**THE RED JAGUAR
TOO DEAD TO RUN**

THE PAWNS OF FEAR

*a
novel
by*

JASON MANOR



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For Jack and Eloise

one

I

The first view of Helios Beach is of a number of stores and service stations strung unevenly along Highway 101. The second view is more attractive, for Helios Beach is one of the few beach towns in Southern California where there are trees in any quantity. On a steeply rising slope east of the highway are eucalyptus, spruce, cypress, and pines, and among the trees stand a few of the great old summer homes of fifty years ago and many expensive-looking modern houses, all with their view windows fixed on the Pacific and their fifty-foot television aerials on Los Angeles.

Below the highway are smaller, cheaper houses and not so many trees. Billy Farrell would live on the west side of the highway.

Number 213 St. James Street was on the west side of the highway, as I had thought. I braked my car to a stop behind an ancient Chevrolet parked in front of an unpainted concrete-block house. It was obvious that Billy Farrell had built the house himself. Mortar hung messily out of the joints, and a slice of tar-paper showed above the doorframe. Frame and door were unpainted still. Billy Farrell knew how to do everything, but he did nothing very well and hardly anything to completion. He was handy on a boat, though, and I hoped to get him to come out with me on mine for the albacore season.

Mary Farrell answered the door. She was a big woman with faded blonde hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her face was shiny pink and gave the impression of being somehow pulled back as tightly as her hair. The whites of her steel-grey eyes were veined with pink. She looked at me

without recognition.

"I'm Steve Summers, Mary," I said. "Billy went fishing with me three years ago—do you remember?"

She nodded a little. But something was wrong. "Is Billy here?" I asked. "I've been hoping he could come out fishing with me—"

"You'll have to get somebody else," Mary Farrell said. She had a deep, husky voice. "He's dead," she said.

She looked at me with her great blank eyes, as though I should go away. But finally she backed up a step and turned and said, "Come in if you want to." I followed her into a bright, clean, neat room, with linoleum on the floor, a davenport and an easy chair upholstered in a loud tropical-flower pattern, a small fireplace in which there were a great many silver-, green-, and red-painted pine cones. Over the fireplace was a mantel that held two framed photographs. One showed Billy in levis, shirtless, a blotch of highlight on his balding brown head, holding up a sea bass that must have weighed seventy pounds. The other photograph showed the face of a pretty, blonde little girl.

"What happened, Mary?"

She sat down in the overstuffed chair and folded her big hands in her lap. On her feet were bright blue broken-down carpet slippers. "He fell off the pier and drowned," she said. "One night about ten days ago—May twenty-first. He was drunk. He fell off the pier and drowned."

I heard in her voice the tag-ends of fury and bitterness at Billy for getting drunk, falling off the pier, drowning. I glanced at the photographs on the mantel again. The bald man holding up the big fish had drunk all right, and had not done that well either. The other photograph was of his and Mary's daughter, whose name I had forgotten—she must be seven or eight now. She had cerebral palsy. The photograph showed a sweet, fair face; it didn't show the brace, a horror of chrome and leather and straps and buckles that took half an hour to put on and had to be put on and taken off many times each day.

Mary Farrell was looking at the photograph too. "I haven't

told her yet," she said in her thick voice. "I can't just write it for some nurse to read it to her. I have to go up there to Oakland to tell her, and I can't stand to do it. I can't—" She rubbed her hands down her face. "That damn fancy hospital. Oh, damn him!"

So there was no insurance and no money to pay the hospital bills. I said, "Isn't there some kind of foundation that can take care of her, Mary?"

"He always said we'd take care of her. He always said he wasn't going to have her in county hospital or any place where they didn't care. She had to have the best hospital on the Coast—four hundred miles away, so it cost a fortune even to—" She stopped and shook her head. Then she began to cry—hard, reluctant sobs that shook her. Then, as abruptly, she stopped and stared at the fireplace with a kind of terror and determination in her red face.

I got up and awkwardly said that I was sorry, and said goodbye, and went out into the bright, warm California sunshine. As I moved down the concrete walk I looked out at the Pacific, as calm and flat as a sheet of blue-green plastic. I could just see the Helios Beach pier, extending out into the ocean about a half a mile to the north. White dabs like cotton showed where the pilings met the water.

I was wondering about Billy Farrell, who had spent a good part of his life in close contact with boats and piers, the ocean and whisky. I wondered about his getting drunk and falling off the pier and crowning.

I parked in the gravelled parking area, next to a little yellow MG. To the right was a beach pavilion, a dirty-brown shingled structure with the windows still boarded up; the summer season would not start for several more weeks. In front of the pavilion, and at the top of a steep incline, was a boardwalk and a railing, on which you could lean and watch the people sunning themselves on the beach.

Now the beach was littered with piles of kelp in long windrows, and I could see among the piles a water-logged box, and, farther down, a sand-filled Coca-Cola case, a section of telephone pole, a galvanized five-gallon can. Raised high above the beach on its stilts of legs, the pier ran out into the water seventy or eighty yards. Waves slashed along the dark, splayed piles and swept in to slide up around the kelp on the beach. The late sun hung orange-red just over the end of the pier, outlining the lone fisherman hunched there. He was the only person in sight.

I walked slowly out along the pier, past one sign that said, KEEP OFF, and another that said, PASS AT YOUR OWN RISK. The worn, weathered planking trembled beneath my feet as the waves slammed in. The railing was chest high, and once I stopped and leaned against it. It would be impossible to tip myself over without climbing up on it, and Billy Farrell had been a short man. I scowled, shook my head, and wondered if I were inquisitive, just naturally suspicious, or morbid. He could, after all, have passed out on the planking and rolled off. I walked on out toward the end, where the fisherman sat. He wore a grease-stained sweatshirt with the sleeves chopped off, a straw cap with a long bill. From his pole the line angled far out into the water. He gave me a disinterested glance as I came up.

"Catching anything?"

"Kelp."

As I leaned on the rail beside him I saw the boy on the surfboard. He was sitting astride it, fifteen yards or so to the left of the pier—tall, with sunburned broad shoulders and crew-cut hair. He gazed steadily back at the sinking sun, watching for waves.

I said to the fisherman, "That looks rough down there," and received a grunt in reply. "I heard a fellow fell off and drowned awhile back," I said.

"That's right."

"Suicide?"

"The rail over there fell off, was how it happened." He jerked a thumb, and I turned to see a new length of two-by-

four that had been fitted into the weathered railing, between two uprights. "I knew him pretty well," the fisherman said. "He lived in town here."

"Awful way to die, in among those piles."

"He was beat up pretty bad, I guess." The fisherman had a fat, dark face with a great mole puckering the flesh of his right cheek. His hands on the pole were as steady as braces nailed there.

"Married?" I asked.

"And a kid—little crippled girl."

"He had insurance, I hope."

"I don't think so; not Billy." He shook his big head unhappily. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know how Mary's going to make out. That's his wife. The little girl's in some fancy kids' hospital up north. Billy told me once it costs five hundred a month to keep her there, and Mary's lucky she makes half that at the PO. She works at the PO. I don't know how she—" He stopped and glanced up at me as though he'd been talking too much.

I leaned on the pier beside him and watched the sun slowly coming to rest on the horizon. After a long time he said again, "I just don't know how Mary's going to make out."

The boy on the surfboard began to paddle furiously. A wave curled up behind him; the wave caught him, he got to his feet and, the board invisible now in front of the wave, seemed to be borne along on the white foam by some angelic power. Balancing with easy movements of his arms, he skimmed in slantwise toward the beach.

"Terrible thing," I said to renew my conversation with the fisherman. I was doing some simple addition in my head. "What kind of job did this man have?"

"He fished. He did odd jobs sometimes. He didn't work steady." The fisherman scratched at his mole. "He had a big skiff with an inboard—good, fast boat. Mostly he fished. He had some lobster pots."

He fell silent again. I saw him glance to the left, to the south, where on a clear day the Coronado Islands in Mexi-

can waters should be visible. They were in easy reach of a good, fast skiff with an inboard. It cost five hundred dollars a month to keep the little crippled girl in the hospital in Oakland; Mary Farrell made half that at the PO if she were lucky; and there were living expenses. Billy Farrell had not made up the difference with his fishing and his lobster pots or going out on an albacore trawler summers. I moved around behind the fisherman and leaned a hand on the upright that held up a light in a green metal reflector. I gazed south toward Mexico and wondered what it had been, opium or marijuana or wetbacks or parrots—or one of the many other things that it was profitable to smuggle in from Mexico. Billy Farrell had loved his daughter; I remembered when he had described that brace to me. "She had to have the best," Mary Farrell had said.

I took out my pipe, filled it and lit it, and moved back across the pier to lean on the new section of railing. I wondered why Mary Farrell had not mentioned that the railing had broken. The wood was still yellow, but the nails that held it were already rusty. In time the nails might rust through; then the weight of a man's body might dislodge the piece of rail, and if the man were off balance he would fall. The new board measured eight and a half handspans in length.

I watched a man come out from under the pier. He was walking along the border of the wet sand, carrying a long stick which he used as a cane. His grey hair was short; he wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and grey trousers of the style they wear in England and on the Continent—beltless, and with flaps on the hip pockets. I watched him march on up the beach, swinging his walking stick. Then I saw that the boy on the surfboard had come out from shore again. He had paddled around the end of the pier to the side where I was, and he was staring up at me intently. He looked nineteen or twenty. He still stared up at me, unabashed, when I met his eyes.

Only an inverted red saucer of sun showed now on the horizon. I started back along the pier, descended wooden

steps to the beach, and walked along the water's edge south of the pier. The current swept in a southerly direction here. I followed the widely spaced holes made by the walking stick of the man I had seen. I walked almost a mile south of the pier, and returned higher on the beach, through the soft, dry sand. I was looking for the piece of railing that had fallen off the pier with Billy Farrell, although I knew it was too late to find it now.

When I got back to the pier the fisherman was gone. The boy with the surfboard was just coming up out of the water, his balsa-wood board on his shoulder. He moved quickly so as to pass close to me, and as he did so he looked me intently in the face again. "Hi," he said, and I took my pipe out of my mouth and said, "Hi," in return. But he didn't say anything more. He leaned his surfboard against the cliff, and I followed him up the wooden steps. Without looking at me again, he crossed the parking lot to the yellow MG, got in it, and, with the motor racing and the tyres spinning in the loose gravel, tore out of the parking area.

In my own car, in the increasing darkness, I drove back to 213 St. James Street. Now, behind the old Chevrolet, six or seven thousand dollars' worth of cream-coloured Cadillac convertible was parked. I stopped and sat there looking at it. I got out and moved quietly up the walk to the door, then stepped off the little porch and through a flowerbed to where I could see into one of the living-room windows. Mary Farrell was standing before the fireplace, her hands clenched at her waist, on her face the frightened, determined expression I had seen once before. She was talking vehemently, but I could hear nothing she said.

She was talking to a man sitting in the overstuffed chair. I could see only the back of his head—carefully combed blond hair that was long over his temples and shaped into a smooth wave. He was smoking a cigarette in a silver holder. One of his arms, in a light-coloured coat sleeve, lay on the arm of the chair. A tan, slim hand tapped gently on the chair arm as he listened to Mary Farrell.

I heard a door slam. The sound came from the house next

door, and I saw a dark figure come out, heard water turned on. Quickly I moved down the walk to my car and drove back up the street. I drove into the centre of Helios Beach, looking for a bar.

3

The Helios Beach Hotel was a huge pink stucco pile surrounded by palms and pine trees. Blue neon announced the Islander Bar. The lobby of the hotel was empty, the bar empty, except for the bartender and a woman in a black sweater who was leaning over the bar, her back to me. The bar room was done in a South Seas motif, with a woven palm-leaf ceiling and, on the walls, crossed bolo knives and grotesque carved masks. I sat down near the woman. On the polished counter were round coasters printed with descriptions of various exotic rum drinks.

The bartender came down to get my order for a bourbon and water. The woman turned to look at me, and smiled. She seemed to be about my age, which is thirty-nine, with a pleasantly angular, pale, aristocratic face. She wore two long loops of pearls, very white against her black sweater, and her brown hair was done up in a loose bun.

"Very atmospheric here," I said.

She blinked, as though she were not used to being spoken to by strangers in bars—although she had smiled at me first. She raised her cigarette to her mouth with a slow gesture that took a good part of a minute, and said, in a careful, completely drunken drawl, "Yes. Very. Are you staying here at the hotel?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. This seems like a nice town."

She nodded, bringing her cigarette up again with the cautious motion. The bartender returned with my drink and went away again. "Very nice," the drunk woman said. "A very nice town. I have lived here for ten years, and they have been the happiest . . ." She let the sentence go after

"happiest." She was an attractive woman, drunk as she was. She began the complicated procedure of raising her martini glass to her lips, and I looked away and sipped my own drink. The bartender was watching the woman out of the corners of his eyes as he wiped glasses.

She executed the manoeuvre of taking a drink and raised her cigarette again. She asked me politely, "Are you here for the convention?"

"No; what convention is it?"

"America Incorporated." She frowned, having had trouble with "incorporated." "Begins next Saturday," she said.

"What's America Incorporated?"

She blinked slowly against the smoke that floated from her cigarette up into her eyes. She crossed her legs, propped her elbow on a knee, and put her chin on her hand, in a slow motion that made the whole action look exceedingly difficult yet practised, like an extraordinary gymnastic feat. She smiled as a slim honey-blonde girl in a blue dress who was passing by said, "Well, Edie." The girl was followed by an intellectual-looking type who wore squarish horn-rimmed glasses and a grey suit of a severe Eastern cut. They took a booth at the far end of the bar.

"America Incorporated is a patriotic organization," the woman called Edie said, and stumbled over "incorporated" again.

She dissolved her position with the same tense care, and contemplated her martini glass, which was almost empty. Her rich brown hair had a slash of grey in it. The pearls looked real, and I suspected that the stones gaiting in the thick bracelet on her wrist were not rhinestones.

A young man in a light cashmere suit seated himself on the stool beside Edie. He had thick, carefully groomed blonde hair, and I had seen him just a few minutes ago through the window of Mary Farrell's house.

"Oh, hello, darling," Edie said with an especially ponderous slowness.

The blonde young man gave me a keen, comprehensive look. Edie's hand touched his arm; he took her hand in his.

and his fingers circled her wrist, over the thick diamond bracelet. "Edie, you've been drinking pretty fast, haven't you?" His voice held a tinge of disapproval, and Edie flushed deeply. Her mouth trembled, then, as her eyes caught mine, shaped into a wisp of an embarrassed smile. It was a disturbing smile, with the embarrassment but pride too, and something like defiance. I looked away.

"Let's have one together, Russie," I heard her say.

"Oh, I don't think you really want another," the young man said pleasantly. "Anyway, we're going in to eat; Erika's waiting. Have you seen Art?" Then he called, "We're going in to eat now, Art!"

The escort of the girl in blue raised a finger, lifted his glass, and gulped. The girl in blue glanced around with a disgusted expression; she had a wary, spoiled, arrogantly pretty face. Beside me the young man raised Edie's glass, drained it, and put it back on the bar empty. She watched it go from the counter to his lips and back again.

"I want another drink, please," she whispered.

Her young man got off his stool and took her arm.

"I want another drink," Edie said. "They'll put gardenias in your drink if you want, Russie. I want a gardenia in my martini. I want to drink beautiful—"

"Come on, Edie," Russie said gently, and she stopped talking, her fine face pitiful and drunken. She took hold of the young man's arm and got up with that careful action of a tumbler running through a new and terribly difficult routine. She smiled at me.

The young man, Russie, smiled at me too and gave me once more the sharp, comprehensive examination with his glacial blue eyes. His hair was a heavy halo around his small face, his eyes were large and wide-set, his nose thin with high, arched nostrils, and the smile was completely charming. He was not merely handsome, he was beautiful. Then, as he started to turn away, his smile was turned off, and suddenly his mouth spoiled his face—thin, too small, almost cruel. Holding Edie's arm, he guided her out of the bar. In the brighter illumination of the lobby the light shone

on their hair—his head, which was at the same height as hers, bright gold; hers, rich brown with the dramatic silver stripe.

I turned back and ordered another highball. Down in the far booth the girl in the blue dress and the man called Art were arguing. "Go!" I heard the girl say. "If you want to go have dinner by the numbers, go. But I'm going to finish my drink, and if I feel like having another I will. Go on if you want to go."

When the bartender brought my highball I said, "Who's the blonde boy?"

"Name's Quaintance."

Russie Quaintance. The name Russell Quaintance rang a distinct bell, but I couldn't quite place it. Hollywood seemed logical, but I didn't think that was it. Russell Quaintance.

"Pretty, isn't he?" the bartender said.

"Very. What's he do?"

"One thing and another. Mostly he doesn't have to do anything. Just went out of here with about ten million bucks on his arm." He scrubbed furiously at the bar in front of where Edie and Quaintance had been sitting; he gave me a look of pale fury. "She may be a stew, but she's got class, buddy. And not just because she's got ten or fifteen or twenty million bucks, either.

"Who is she?"

"Edith Mason. Mrs. Colonel Richard Emlyn Mason, only he's dead now. You know?"

I did know, and the twenty-million-dollar figure was probably closest. Colonel Richard Emlyn Mason had died in a prison camp in Korea. I watched the man in the horn-rimmed glasses and the narrow-shouldered grey suit come down the aisle between the bar and the booths with a stormy, jut-jawed face.

"Ernie, will you make me another highball, please?" the girl in blue called.

Someone going the other way shouldered past me, a tall boy in a long tomato-red cashmere sweater and tan slacks—

the boy I'd seen surfing off the end of the pier. He sat down in the booth with the girl. He put his head close to hers, and they whispered together; once they both glanced at me, then studiously away.

It was all too much for me, and I finished my drink and left the bar. I registered at the desk, without quite thinking why I did it, and went into the dining room to see about dinner. The dining room was huge, with windows giving on to the patio, the windows black now and the big room empty except for Edith Mason, Quaintance, the rejected escort, and an emaciated, erect, severe-looking white-haired woman; they were sitting at a large table before one of the windows. They all watched me as I crossed the echoing room and sat down near a window too, one table away from them.

Soon after I had ordered, the honey-blonde came in, her heels rapping on the polished floor. As she passed me she gave me the same inquisitive stare the boy with the surf-board had, but hers had more communication in it; when she smiled at me her wary, almost sullen face became quite different and demanded an answering smile. She sat down beside the man in the grey suit, but sitting there, as erect as the old woman, she gave the impression of not being with him or with anyone else at the table.

As I ate my steak I watched the people at the other table. Their conversation was low, and I could hear none of it. I tried to sort out the relationships. There were no family resemblances. Edith Mason pushed at her food and smiled up at Russell Quaintance from time to time, but her shoulders were sagging, her eyes drooping—she looked as though someone had better take her home. The old woman said little, but when she spoke was listened to with respect. She and Quaintance both seemed to carry authority to which the other man, Art, was subservient. Art told a long story at which no one laughed. The honey-blonde hardly spoke throughout the meal, and from her expression when she watched whoever was speaking, her emotions toward her companions seemed confined to a range between passive

and active dislike. It was she, finally, who got up to take Edith Mason from the room. With the woman sagging drunkenly on her arm as they moved toward the lobby, the girl gave me again the impression of keeping completely separate.

When Edith Mason and the girl had gone, and the table had been cleared, the old woman took four fat manilla envelopes from a briefcase I hadn't noticed before. After clipping pince-nez glasses to her nose, she sorted through the papers in one of the envelopes. Quaintance and the other man leaned over the table, talking in low voices, Art smoking a cigar, Quaintance a cigarette in a silver holder. It was all very interesting.

Finally I finished my coffee and went upstairs to my room. My window looked out over the patio and the hotel gardens, the beach, pier, and ocean. A pale moon had come up and cast a long path across the water, and a small white light, like a tiny facsimile of the moon, burned on the end of the pier—where Billy Farrell had fallen, to die horribly in among the piles. The steady swash of the waves on the beach was audible, like someone breathing heavily close by.

I left the window, sat down on the bed beside the phone, and called Harriette Hendrix in Los Angeles. It was a good time to call, just about when she would be at home, dressing to go out to some very social dinner party; she had been society editor of the *Los Angeles Star* for at least twenty-five years.

A maid said that Mrs. Hendrix was very busy and could I call tomorrow afternoon. But I said it was Stephen Summers and important, and Harriette's shrill voice came on.

"Hel-lo, sweetie! It's been ages! Where are you?"

"In Helios Beach, in need of information."

"Well, hurry it up, darling. I'm already late for a very swish-swish party."

"I want to know about Edith Mason."

"What Edith Mason, darling? The Emlyn Masons?"

"Yes, the Emlyn Masons' Edith."

"Drinking herself to death, the last I heard. What do you

want to know, sweetie? Dick Mason was killed in Korea, you know; captured by the Reds and died—tortured, they think. A very, very nice, nice guy; she's his second wife. He was the youngest son of, all that Emlyn New England Chemical money. He was quite the playboy until the last war, when he went in the Army and got to be a colonel and all kinds of decorations for bravery. Then he went back in for Korea, and the dirty Reds got him. There are two kids by his first marriage—that was Sheila Davis; remember her in the old movies, darling? Edie was Edith Waterhouse; I don't know her very well. I think she was society but not money. He married her about ten years ago—ten or eleven, toward the end of the war sometime—and he enlarged a house of the family's in Helios Beach and settled her there while he was off in the Pacific."

"Who's Russell Quaintance?" I broke in.

"My God, you're ignorant, darling! Senator Kettle—Russell Quaintance. Don't you—"

"Oh, yes," I said, and remembered. Russell Quaintance had been an investigator for a Congressional unit hunting for Reds in labour unions. There had been a battle in the committee over him; obviously he had been overactive in his investigations, using all the professional ex-Communists to the ultimate stretch of their remarkable memories, faking affidavits, and suborning witnesses. He had embarrassed the committee, and the fight in the committee over him had embarrassed the administration. Finally he had been dismissed, but had gone down firing salvos that had splashed mud over almost everyone concerned in his dismissal. But he had not been in the news much for some time now.

"He's after her money, of course," Harriette said, "and I really *can't* blame her for being crazy about that beautiful, beautiful boy. The gossip is that she wants desperately to marry him, but the kids—Dick Mason's kids—are up in arms against him. I can't blame them either. He *is* such a heel. But so handsome."

"What does he do?"

"Oh, heavens, let's see. He went down to Mexico to sulk,

you know, after the committee had fired him. Since he's been back I think he lectures, and he helps on Warren Raile's TV show—that awful show, have you seen it, sweetie? If you haven't, don't; it'll just make you sick. I don't know what else he does. I suppose he'll be sounding off for that America Incorporated convention they're having down there. Listen, Steve, sweetie, I have to run now, but the very next time you're in Los Angeles if you don't come out and—"

"Now wait a minute, Harriette. Just one more thing. What's America Incorporated all about?"

"Don't you *ever* read the papers, sweetie? It's a huge thing with chapters all over the Coast—no, not just the Coast, either. It's very, very social and very patriotic. A bunch of fat society ladies who think they're Molly Pitchers, listening to people like Russell Quaintance and Warren Raile. Very reactionary and very sickening; I've been to several meetings. My God, the awful stuff they feed those poor darlings, and I don't mean the chicken à la king. They're anti-UN and anti-UNESCO, of course, and anti-Europe and anti-anything outside of the United States—and maybe even California by now, for all I know. Now, sweetie, I really have to run." And she hung up.

I pulled a wicker chair over to the window, lit my pipe again, and sat looking at the light on the end of the pier. There was a soft rap on my door.

"Come in," I said.

The honey-blonde stepped inside and leaned back against the door to close it. "I'm Laura Mason," she said.

I got to my feet.

"You're Stephen Summers," she said. She stood with her back against the door. When she smiled nervously her teeth showed, small and very white. Her blonde hair grew close to the ends of her eyebrows, like a helmet, as though to protect her temples. She looked in her very early twenties and had that slim, soft but muscular look that women swimmers have.

"Won't you sit down?" I said, and she sat on the edge of

the bed and crossed her legs. She wore no stockings, and her legs were very tanned. On her feet were brown and white spectator pumps. "You're here for the convention, aren't you?" she said.

I sat down again, leaned back in the wicker chair, drawing on my pipe and studying Edith Mason's stepdaughter. "No," I said. "I'm not here for the convention. Why?"

"Yes, you are," she said, and her lips drew together tightly. "You must be. Are you a member of America Incorporated?"

She stared at me so accusingly that I felt I had to defend myself. I said, "I hardly ever join women's clubs. Are you a member, Miss Mason?"

Her face relaxed a little. She made a mock-insulted moue, "Why, of course!" she said with heavy irony. "Junior member in good standing. Why, I'm shocked to hear you aren't too—I would have taken you for a good American. If you're not a member of America Incorporated you're probably not a good loyal American, and if you're not a good loyal American then you're probably subversive. Subversive," she said, and showed her teeth in a stiff grin.

"I thought America Incorporated was a women's organization."

"It used to be. But men can join now. The convention is to work up a membership drive for men. There's no reason why men can't be good loyal Americans, is there?"

"None that I can think of."

"And why not play it safe?" Laura Mason went on, and the irony in her voice had disintegrated into bitterness and anger. "All other organizations may turn out to be subversive—Red front, you know. Infiltrated. Besides, after a while not belonging may get to be subversive. Best to play it safe. All the best people belong already. You see?"

"I appreciate all this advice, but I wish I knew what you were getting at."

"I want to hire you to do something."

"I'm sorry, I'm not for hire." I glanced at the door. "But let's get your brother in here and discuss it anyway." I got

up quickly, stepped across the room, and jerked the door open. I caught hold of the back of the tomato-red cashmere sweater. "Come on in," I said.

The tall surfer turned reluctantly. He thrust his hands down into the pockets of his slacks and moved in past me. He shrugged at Laura Mason, and she gave him an aggravated scowl. "This is Richard Mason," she said to me. "Richard Mason the Third."

I put out my hand. He disengaged his hand from his pocket, ducked his head a little, and grinned. His face was flushed. He looked very little like his sister, with his dark cropped hair, his heavy black eyebrows and long, lean face.

"Now what's all this about?" I asked.

Richard Mason III said, "We need a detective."

"Dick recognized you this afternoon," Laura Mason said. "He's seen your picture in the paper about that grand-jury thing up in Los Angeles."

"Westhaven," Dick corrected her. "It was that pipe that did it, Mr. Summers. You were out there on the pier, leaning on the rail, with that big old pipe in your mouth, just like that one picture they had in the *Times*. We noticed that specially because—remember, Laura?—we thought you looked so much like—"

"And we checked the register just now," Laura said.

"I'm a retired detective," I said. "I don't—"

"We can pay you a lot, Mr. Summers. I don't come into dough until next year when I'm twenty-one, but Laura's loaded. We can pay you a lot."

"Dick, if you'd shut up for a minute I could tell him what we want to hire him for."

"Well, what've you been doing all this time?" He turned to me. "To get that goddam Quaintance!" he said furiously.

"Get Quaintance?" I said. "Get him how?"

"That's up to you," Laura said.

"Any way, for Christ's sake!" Dick said. His big flat hands were knitted together. "Any goddam way. Just so you show Edie some way what a dirty rotten stinking crumb he is. Just so—any way you can get something on him. We

don't care how much it costs, just so we get Edie rid of him. Do we, Laura?"

"That's not exactly the way I'd put it," Laura said.

"Listen, you'll help us, won't you, Mr. Summers?"

I said, "I'm retired. Which means I don't take on any work unless it's something I want to do. This doesn't sound—"

Laura said imperiously, "Dick, I want you to leave. We agreed that I was going to handle this, and all you do is shout and wave your arms."

"Oh, you're so goddam calm," Dick said, but he sulkily got up. "Oh, all right," he said, and, hands in pockets, went out.

Laura Mason's brown hands shook as she lit a cigarette. It was a long time before she spoke, and then she didn't look at me directly. "Our reasons aren't exactly the same," she said, "Dick's and mine." She fanned smoke away from her face. "Dick's an Emlyn Mason and a gentleman. Dad stuck by Edie despite all her faults, so he's going to too. Edie wants to marry Russell Quaintance, and he's after her money, and he'd be awful to her when he got it, so Dick wants to get rid of him for Edie's sake. He thought a lot of Dad. He—"

"What are your reasons?" I asked.

Her jaw stiffened, her eyes turned cold; she looked suddenly hard and relentless. "Not for her," she said. "I think they probably deserve each other."

"Watching you at the table tonight, I got the idea you didn't like her much."

"You *are* a good detective. No, I don't like her. She's a drunk. She's—she's so pitiful, posing as the original great lady even when she's ready to fall on her face from her tenth martini—especially then. Hanging around in the bar down there to pick up men, chasing after male chippies ten years younger than she is! She was awful to Dad, she—"

"Is that the way she met Quaintance? In this bar?"

Her cheeks whitened in finger-stripes as though she'd been slapped, but she grinned a little. "No, I introduced him to

her. I'd met him at a party in Los Angeles—oh, a little over three months ago. I asked him down for a weekend. I thought he was the worst kind of fascist jerk, having to listen to him for two whole days, but Edie fell for him. Maybe I'd known she would. So maybe I feel guilty about starting it."

I grunted. "What other reasons? Your father's memory? How long has he been dead?"

"Eighteen months. That's when we found out about it, anyway. No, I guess my reasons are mostly money." She tried to say it cynically. I was beginning to like her, for all the tension of her emotions and her poses.

"Money?" I said.

"My father's money. Quaintance getting it. I can't quite stomach that."

I looked at her silently, and she flushed.

"Money," she said again. "Listen, I'm proud of my family. We go back to the revolution—the Emlyns do, anyhow. My family made a lot of money, and they weren't robber barons about it, either. They were pretty fine public-spirited-type citizens, right down to my father—to Dick too. Well, I don't want my family's money going into America Incorporated. A lot's gone in already—as much as Quaintance could bleed out of Edie in three months. I don't much know how much, but a lot. I want to hire you to stop it."

"Is America Incorporated as bad as all that?"

"Yes," Laura said through her teeth. She leaned forward and rubbed a hand up and down her bare arm as though she were cold. "Yes, it's as bad as that. It's so horrible that his money should go into it because it's the sort of thing he hated so—Dad. America Incorporated is a horrible thing; it scares me silly. Somebody had better get busy fighting it."

"So you're going to fight it by hiring a detective to get something on Quaintance."

She shrugged; her head was bent down. "I hate it," she said. "They're so big and powerful now, and growing. And they're so confident. The way they can ruin anyone that gets in their way—throw dirt on anyone and make the dirt

stay on. They don't care about anyone or anything that's—oh, and all those silly women who—" She made a sound that was half a laugh. "I hate them so. Sometimes it seems as though I spend all my time hating them and being afraid of them."

I didn't say anything, watching Laura Mason. For all her youth and her pride and her bitterness, she was a person I thought I might respect. And I thought I would like to have known Colonel Richard Emlyn Mason.

"Tell me about your father," I said.

She was silent for a long time. Once I saw her shake her head a little. She said, as though her thoughts had taken her away from my question, "It's such a rotten irony for Dad to be paying *their* bills." She looked up at me. "He was a *real* American. He was a *real* Red-fighter. He was in the Reserves, but he was almost fifty; he wouldn't have had to go back in when Korea happened. But he volunteered right away; he knew what we had to fight for and where the real fighting was going to take place. He fought *real* Reds, and *real* Reds killed him. Not the kind of Reds *they* fight; people who belonged to the party for two weeks in the thirties and then saw through it and quit, or people who don't say nice things about *them*, that don't have the same rotten ideas they have—those are *their* Reds." She stopped and wrinkled up her nose. "Oh, I guess you'd better ask someone else about Dad," she said. "I'm sure he couldn't have been as good a man as Dick and I think he was."

"Did you know a man here named Billy Farrell?"

She frowned and shook her head uncertainly.

"He fell off the pier one night about ten days ago and drowned. He was a friend of mine."

"I heard about that. Yes, I guess I do remember him—a little bald-headed man?"

I nodded. She didn't say any more, watching me with narrowed eyes and wondering why I had asked about Billy Farrell. I was just as glad when she changed the subject.

"Quaintance is staying at our house," she said. "He and his bodyguard. We'll pretend you were a friend of Dick's



or of mine, and—"

"Who was the man with you tonight?"

"Art Newman. He's one of them. He's a friend of Quaintance's, so I'd met him before he and Erika came down here to get everything set up for the convention. That was about a week ago. He's in charge of the drive for men's memberships. He's collecting dirty stories to tell the men so they'll think he's a regular fellow. He tries them out on me. It's—"

"Erika is the older woman?"

"Yes; Erika Gard. She's national secretary. She thinks she's Mohammed and Warren Raile is God." She paused, staring straight at me with her brown eyes, and her heart-shaped face was tense and demanding. "Are you going to help Dick and me?"

"I'm leaving for Baja California as soon as the albacore start to run," I said, "but maybe I'll be here for a few days. I think I'd like to hear what goes on at this convention." And I wanted to look into the connection between Russell Quaintance, whom Laura Mason hated so, and the Farrells.

"But you won't help us?"

"I've been trying to tell you I'm retired. Anyway, it's not my kind of job."

She nodded silently. I lit my pipe and, as she rose, rose with her. I thought she was going to speak again, but she said nothing more and with an abrupt motion stepped toward the door, opened it, and went out.

"Good night, Miss Mason," I said, but she didn't reply. She pulled the door closed behind her, and I heard her heels thudding away down the hall. I thought I might be seeing her again.

I put in another long-distance call, to San Francisco this time, then sat in the wicker chair by the window, watching the black ocean, the dim light on the end of the pier, the red riding light of a fishing boat far out, while I waited for my call to go through.

4

It was after eleven when, the call came through. The operator said, "I have Mr. Brainerd for you now, Mr. Summers. Go ahead, please." And Phil Brainerd said, in the distance, "Hello, Steve. Where's Helios Beach?"

"On the coast between San Diego and Los Angeles. Phil, tell me about America Incorporated."

"Oh-oh," Phil said in his slow voice. "Officially, or—"

"This is a person-to-person call."

"Aren't they having a convention down there somewhere this weekend?"

"They're having a convention right here. I checked into the hotel here right in the middle of the advance party. I don't think I like the sound of things."

"Who's there?"

"Russell Quaintance, an Erika Gard, someone named Art Newman, and Edith Mason—Colonel Mason's widow. Although I don't know if she's part of this or not."

"I think she's been putting up a lot of money. Nothing like the Tyge money, of course. She hasn't been in it long. America Incorporated is Warren Raile's outfit, Steve—the columnist. Same slant."

"Bad or harmless?"

"It never was harmless. All of a sudden it's getting worse. We're worried about it. It's the usual extreme nationalist pattern we've been seeing a lot of lately, but so far there doesn't seem to be any effort to convince people that one person or group is the only one capable of dealing with the situation—as always, the internal Communist threat. America Incorporated seems to be all negative. Tear down and scare. Withdraw from Europe—and I think from Asia too, but I'm not up to the minute on their pronouncements. It's been a women's organization up until lately, but a while back they put in co-ed chapters on a lot of college campuses, and now there's a big membership drive for men."

"How big is it?"

"I don't know any figures, but there's a chapter in every sizeable city or town up and down the Coast. It's spreading east, and I think it's doing well in Texas. Raile's got a fancy stable of lecturers, like Quaintance. And the lecturers run in conjunction with that TV show of Raile's and guest-write his column from time to time. I don't know what the thrill is in this sort of thing, unless it's the thrill you get from going to a horror movie. They give the members cold chills about Reds in government and the atomic-energy programme and the universities and schools and labour unions, and in the armed forces—and the clergy. There's an expert for each one of these it seems. Quaintance is the Washington Man. Duwart, of course, gives it to the clergy. Henry Arvin tells them about the spies in the atomic-energy programme. Very bad stuff, Steve."

"What's the official view?"

"The Bureau, of course, has made a general statement that it decries all this amateur assistance and scatter-gun accusing. It makes our work harder; it makes it easier for real Communists to hide or yell 'Smear' if they get hit—which they don't often, by these people. And of course we don't like it that our name is brought in so often. We get in bad odour with the people who are trying to keep a level head over the Communist threat."

"No comment on America Incorporated in particular?"

"None. They've got powerful members and friends, Steve. You ought to look at their masthead some day when you want a shock. I hope these people don't know what they've lent their names to, but then you'd think people would have learned to be careful about that. Raile's a big man. His is one of the most widely syndicated columns in this country, and it's far and away the biggest on the Coast. And that TV show of his has a fair rating, I understand. A lot of people listen to Warren Raile, and he's got big money riding on him with America Incorporated. Am I making you nervous?"

"Very."

"I'm not through yet. The last three or four months America Incorporated has been flexing its muscles and going in for some political action. In every school-board election where the local America Incorporated chapter made a stink—they've raised a lot of stinks, but you only heard about the ones in the big cities, like that mess in San Jose—anyway, in every case America Incorporated defeated the candidate they didn't like. And they've crucified a lot of teachers and superintendents who were nothing more than mild John Deweyites—or as far as we could see, and we can see pretty far."

I sat there glumly with the receiver pressed against my ear.

"Well, let's see," Phil went on in his slow, calm way. "Quaintance, Gard, and Newman. Erika Gard is second in command to Raile in the organization. He's a megalomaniac; she's a patriotic fanatic. Newman is Southern California director or something like that. He comes from a pretty well-to-do family in Connecticut, and he's been a kind of professional college boy. Been to several universities, where he was always an organizer. A political-social fraternity of some kind that he started had a little boom and a messy bust over some anti-Semitic business. He was a graduate student at Columbia then and was asked to depart. He's been in charge of the America Incorporated chapters on the campuses until recently, when he moved up a notch.

"Quaintance you've read about in the papers. except for one thing. There's a pretty strong hunch that since he left the Kettle Committee he's been using his previous access to secret files to engage in a little blackmail here and there. This is only a hunch, mind you, but I'd bet on it."

"Fine fellow."

"Yes, fine. What else, Steve?"

"I can't quite remember all I read about Colonel Mason's death. Was it an atrocity case?"

"Evidently he was put through some kind of torture. But he was kept separate from the other prisoners, and no one knows how he died. Murder, suicide to escape torture,

dysentery—take your pick. It still adds up to murder. I suppose it was easy for America Incorporated to get Mrs. Mason into the organization. Her money helping to fight the Communism that murdered her husband—that sort of line."

"She's crazy in love with Quaintance."

"They all are, Steve. I've only seen photographs of him and I don't get it, but they all seem to be. How are you concerned with this crew? Just curious?"

"A friend of mine died the other day here, possibly mysteriously, and I've been wondering if he might not have been connected with these people—with Quaintance, at least."

"Well, get in touch with the San Diego or Los Angeles office if you run on to anything Federal. They'll surely have a man on the convention anyway. Or if you run on to anything really interesting, call me, will you?"

I said I would, thanked him, hung up, and went to bed and tried to go to sleep on it all.

5

When I had breakfast in the dining room America Incorporated was not in evidence. The desk man informed me that the sheriff of Pacific County was in Lyall, thirty miles inland, but that there was a deputy in Crown Bay, the next beach town to the south. I drove the three miles down the highway to Crown Bay, and found the deputy's car, a black coupe with a large gold star painted on the door. It was parked in front of a violently modern structure of bricks and glass and corrugated plastic sheeting. Half the building was a realtor's office; in the other half a state patrolman and a man in a modified rancher's hat were talking, the patrolman hunkered on to the other's desk. A black and white motorcycle was parked at an angle before the deputy's car.

I went inside. On the desk was a chrome electric coffeepot

and a triangular sign that said: B. J. OSTER. The man in the rancher's hat and the patrolman, who wore dark glasses, gave me the hostile glances of cops who are afraid something may be expected of them. I said I was looking for the deputy sheriff.

"Sitting right here," the man in the rancher's hat said. Beneath the broad brim of his hat his face was young, pink, and plump. He wore a grey corduroy jacket. "What can I do for you, Mac?"

"I'd like some information about the death of William Farrell."

The deputy and the state trooper exchanged glances. The deputy stuck his tongue in his cheek and scowled at me. "You don't have to tell me," he said. "You're an insurance investigator, and it turns out Farrell took out a life policy a couple of months ago."

"No, I'm just a friend of his. I went to see his wife yesterday, but it's painful asking her questions, so I thought I'd come up here."

"What's your name, Mac?" the deputy asked. He was trying hard to achieve the *de rigueur* crisp and overbearing manner.

I said that my name was Stephen Summers, my home Singer's Harbour, that I had a fishing boat and was in San Diego for a summer of fishing, and that I'd wanted Farrell to go along with me as crew.

"You the Summers from that Westhaven business?" the state trooper asked.

I said I was. They both looked at me. The deputy, Oster, took three paper cups from a drawer and jerked his thumb at the coffeepot. "Coffee, Summers?"

"Please." He poured the coffee, and the three of us drank together ceremoniously. The coffee was hot, thick, and bitter. Outside, the radio on the trooper's motor-cycle crackled, and the trooper quickly drained his cup.

"I'm off," he said. He shook hands with me, nodded to Oster, and hurried out, slapping a pair of gauntlets against his leg. His motorcycle exploded into life and peeled off on

to the highway.

"Well," Oster said, "Farrell fell off the pier and drowned. He was drunk, I guess; the bartender at the hotel said he was pretty drunk when he left there. A hunk of railing was missing out at the end of the pier, so I guess what happened, he was leaning on it, and it gave way, and, being drunk, over he went. Those piles really gave him hell. The coroner's jury found it was an accident." He put his hands on the desk top, palms up, and looked at me with one eyebrow cocked.

"Will I be treading on your toes if I pry around a little on the possibility that it wasn't an accident?"

"Pushed, you think?"

I shrugged.

"You won't be treading on my toes. The sheriff's office is through with it. My own idea is that Farrell prized that piece of railing loose himself and jumped. But I wasn't hard-hearted enough to bring the point up."

"And now you're waiting for an insurance investigator to show. Well, you may be right." I finished my coffee and put the cup down. Oster picked it and the trooper's cup up and flipped them into the wastebasket.

"You know about his little girl, I guess," he said.

I nodded, and he nodded.

"Hard lines," he said. "I've got a little girl that age myself. Trouble like that costs one hell of a lot of money, and Farrell didn't have it. Any way you look at it, he couldn't have had it. He was a bum. I liked him; everybody liked him: but he was a bum. He wouldn't take a job. He'd go out in that boat of his and fish, but I know damn well he didn't bring in much. Finally they must've just run through the money they had put away, and so he took out a policy for himself and jumped. I guess there're people who'd rather jump than take a job. Sure, I'm waiting for an insurance investigator."

"Did you find the piece of railing?"

"We didn't find it."

"Who owns the pier?"

"Nobody. It belonged to an old hotel that used to be on

the beach there—where the pavilion is. It went broke in thirty-five or -six and then burned down. The pier's condemned. You go out on it at your own risk. The lifeguards keep it up a little; they put a new piece of railing in, and they put up a new light out on the end where Farrell went over. There'd been one, but vandals had torn it down."

"Is there anybody you can think of who might have wanted to kill him? Any fight, or trouble of any kind?"

B. J. Oster shook his head. "Everybody liked him." He took off the rancher's hat and ran his fingers through his reddish hair. "Everybody liked him, as far as I know. He might have been kind of hard on his wife." He gave me a sharp look. "Sure, she might have taken out the policy. And — There's that."

"You don't know if there is a policy yet."

"That's so. But I'm taking bets."

"Did Farrell do any odd jobs for Mrs. Mason? Do you know?"

He looked at me with worried eyes; he shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

"Do you know Russell Quaintance?"

"Know who he is; I've seen him around. He's been staying up at Masons' a lot the last couple-three months. What're you getting at?"

"Do you know of any connection between Farrell and Quaintance, or Farrell's wife and Quaintance?"

Grimacing, he shook his head. He said slowly, "Quaintance's a pretty big wheel in America Incorporated, I guess you know. That's a high-gear outfit." He cleared his throat. "What're you getting at, Summers?"

"Quaintance seems like a pretty sophisticated boy."

He nodded.

"Maybe sophisticated enough to be on opium? Maybe Farrell was running it in for him."

"That's pretty wild, isn't it?"

"Farrell paid the bills for that little girl somehow. Evidently he didn't catch enough fish to do it. It's not far down to Mexico, and that's supposed to be a fast boat of his."

Oster didn't like what he was thinking. "He didn't seem like that kind of guy," he said. He took off his hat and put it on his desk. He looked unhappy.

"He loved his little girl, and he wanted to have the best treatment for her. Maybe he didn't know any other way to do it."

"There's that, all right."

"If he was running in opium or marijuana or whatever, probably he was running it in for someone. I doubt that he was in a position to market it himself. A good many murders come out of trafficking in dope—and blackmail. And murder comes out of blackmail. Blackmailers get pushed off piers."

"You think Farrell was running something for Quaintance and blackmailing him, so Quaintance pushed him off the pier and knocked off that piece of rail to make it look like an accident?"

"I don't really think anything."

Oster wet his lips and glanced out the windows at the cars streaming past on Highway 101. He looked worried and very young. He lit a cigarette and studied the burning end for a long time. "My mother belongs to this America Incorporated," he said.

He scowled down at his cigarette. "But I don't think I like it much," he went on presently. "I don't like the people they think are hot stuff. I've heard a lot of really crummy things about this Quaintance—and that Newman, backslapping around. I don't like a lot of things my mother says since she's been going to America Incorporated meetings." His pink, freckled cheeks began to flush deeply. "But they're pretty big people," he said. "I don't know."

"I'm not involving you. As I said, I'm just prying around."

He nodded, relieved. He picked up his pencil and poked the rubber end against the side of his nose. "You know, I guess I won't relay any of this on to the sheriff, since you're only throwing spitballs." He gave me a sickly grin. "If you think I'm a little scared to mix it with these people you're trying to hitch Farrell to, you're right. But anything I can

do to help I mean that in a very damn qualified way."

"Thanks," I said. "Tell me about the night he died."

"Well, he was drinking at the bar in the hotel. He left pretty drunk, a little before midnight, the bartender said—alone. Probably you ought to talk to the bartender. Well, there was nothing to go on after Farrell left the hotel, but we assumed he wandered out on the pier straight from the hotel. I saw him when they brought him in, and somebody could have batted him on the head all right. He was beat up pretty awful around the head from those piles."

"Who found him?"

"Some kids who live in one of the beach houses along there. They'd gone down for a swim before breakfast and found him—about seven-thirty in the morning."

I nodded. "Well, I'll see you again, Mr. Oster. Thanks."

He got up. "You're sure welcome. Good luck and all." He stood there lighting a cigarette as he watched me go out. The gold star on the door of his car glittered in the sun.

6

Back in Helios Beach, I turned off the highway on to St. James Street. The old Chevrolet was not in front of the little concrete-block house. Mary Farrell would be at her job at the Post Office. Next door an elderly man in Balboa blues and an undershirt was watering the red geraniums in his front yard. I drove into Mary Farrell's driveway, got out, went up on the porch, and made a show of knocking at the door.

The man next door called, "She's at the PO."

"I wanted to look at the boat," I called back. "I heard there was a boat for sale here."

"It's in the garage. Go ahead and take a look."

I waved thanks at him and opened the garage doors. The boat was resting in a padded cradle on a four-wheel trailer, a sixteen-footer with a brightly varnished hull, a blue bottom, and the name in bright blue lettering on the bow:

Mirrilees. The brass fittings were all clean and polished. There was a tiny cabin, a white steering wheel, a blue canvas upholstered seat. In front of the engine hatch the boat was a runabout, back of the hatch it was utilitarian. I found a sawhorse, pulled it over, stood on it, and opened the engine hatch. The engine was a big, fairly new Chrysler that had cost a lot of money and put out a lot of horses. With that engine the *Mirrilees* could easily outrun the Mexican gunboat based in Ensenada, and give most of the Coast Guard cutters a good race.

"Was it Mexican snow, Billy?" I whispered. Like the deputy, Oster, I hadn't really thought he was that kind of guy.

I climbed into the boat and looked through the plywood cupboards built alongside the dash, finding only some wrenches, greasy rags, hooks and leaders, a copy of the *Coast Pilot's Guide*, and a manual for the engine. I sat on the blue canvas upholstered seat and looked up at the ceiling, contemplating. On the beams above me lengths of lumber were stored. Directly above my head was a weather-beaten, watersoaked, sandy section of two-by-four. Three long, bent, rusty nails protruded downward from either end. I gazed up at it for a long time before I finally stood up and measured it with my fingers. It was exactly eight and a half handspans long.

On the underside, next to the protruding nails, the wood was beaten and bruised where something had hammered it. From the shape of the indentations it looked as though it might have been a narrow pipe or rod.

I brought the length of railing down, climbed out of the boat, and replaced the sawhorse. The garage had a back door that opened on to a fenced back yard where rows of vegetables were laid out in even lines between damp irrigation ditches. There was a gate at the rear of the yard. I crossed hurriedly to the gate, set the length of two-by-four outside in the alley, returned to the garage, and went out the front way. I swung the doors closed behind me and trudged down the driveway in the sun. The neighbour was

still watering his geraniums. As he flipped the hose the sun made the spray look like diamonds.

"Nice-looking boat," I said.

"Fast, I hear."

"Got a good engine in it," I said. I climbed into my car and backed out of the driveway.

I drove around to the alley. The eight and a half hand-spans of two-by-four wouldn't fit into my boot until I jammed one end through the partition and under the back seat. I locked the boot and drove out of the alley, stopped under a eucalyptus tree, and leaned on the steering wheel, considering what I had just found out. Mary Farrell had found the piece of railing on the beach. Or maybe she had just taken it home with her, after having knocked it loose with the same piece of gas pipe with which she had brained Billy Farrell. I felt sad and tired. Maybe it was time for me to back out of Helios Beach and the death of Billy Farrell and its nonexistent connection with a bunch of political opportunists and their dupes, before I learned any more, learned something that I would have to, in good conscience, act upon.

But the piece of railing had been sandy, from the beach; and beneath the sand it had still been slightly damp. It had been in the water.

I started back to the hotel to pay my bill. I would drive down to the anchorage in San Diego to see that everything was all right on the *Marina*, and to sit in the captain's chair on the afterdeck with a drink in my hand and my feet up on the railing and sort through the things on my mind.

When I entered the lobby the desk man got to his feet. When I came up to him he said with a brilliant smile, "I'm sorry, Mr. Summers. We'll have to have your room. We're having a convention here, you know, and all the rooms have been reserved. I'm very sorry. Perhaps—"

"The convention's not until Saturday," I pointed out.

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Who told you to kick me out?"

His smile became a little embarrassed, but it didn't fade.

"No one, sir," he said. "I'm sorry; it's a very unfortunate circumstance, but—"

"Uh-huh," I said, and paid him and left. Someone had misjudged me, but I doubted that it was the person I was obviously meant to suspect.

7

At the San Diego anchorage I walked out on the floating dock where the fishing boats were moored. There were big and little boats, clean and dirty boats, converted pleasure boats and converted landing craft, boats that were no more than big skiffs with trawling outriggers, and five or six trim, handsome Montereys. There were people on almost all of the boats, painting and tinkering, tearing down balky engines or rigging lines along the dock—all of them in a hurry because any day now the albacore might begin to run, and then the faster they were off for Baja California the faster they could get back with a load.

An enormously fat man in greasy overalls was leaning over the stern of his thirty-footer, repainting the raised lettering there:

REMEMBER ME
San Diego

I stopped and asked if the canneries had set their price yet.

"Four hundred," he said, straightening up and scratching his forehead with the back of the hand that held the paintbrush.

"Good!"

"They'll drop it as soon as the boats start coming back."

"Anybody in yet?"

"The *Dolly D.*, with about a ton and a half. They were out ten days. Lousy! You the skipper of the *Marina*?"

I said I was.

"Nice boat," he said, and bent to his painting again.

My *Marina* was moored down near the end of the dock,

with a higher prow than any of the southern boats, all new white paint on the hull, and bright varnished trim, the superstructure cleanly grey and white, and the creosoted outriggers towering upward. She was a fishing boat, squat, utilitarian, and slow, but she was my boat, and I was the skipper; it was a comfortable and sure relationship. No relationship I had ever had with a person had worked out so well.

I clumped on down the dock, nodding to the skippers and crews of the other boats I passed, and climbed aboard. I walked around and looked at everything and fiddled with everything, ran the pump for a few minutes, went below and wiped some grease off the big Cummins Diesel, went up into the pilot house and leaned on the wheel and lit my pipe and gazed out through the blue glare-proof glass at San Diego harbour. Two great grey aircraft carriers were moored at North Island, and a destroyer with a white moustache was cutting in past Point Loma, as lean and businesslike as a razor blade. The Coronado Islands were visible out past the Point. Probably, I thought, I could pick up someone around the anchorage to help me on my first trip, and, if he worked out, use him for the whole season. Maybe a high-school or college boy who had been around boats a little, maybe a wetback; if worst came to worst I could always go by myself. But I had been counting on Billy Farrell, who was a handy man to have along, a good companion—but was dead.

I had always thought of him as a nice but slightly futile guy, humorous, easy-going, ambitionless; and I had pitied him because of the crippled daughter. But he had not been futile. He would have known how stiff was the prison sentence facing him if he were caught running opium, or anything else, in from Mexico. Or of what faced him as a blackmailer if he slipped in that dangerous enterprise. Possibly there had been, for him, none but criminal means to provide for his daughter, and he had provided for her.

He had been murdered, I was sure of that—murdered because of dope-running or blackmail or something else I

hadn't guessed at. And there was no reason to avenge him; he had taken his own chances. No need for revenge, but a need for justice. Stooping, I moved back through the chart room, where my bunk was, into the galley, and mixed water and bourbon in a glass, half and half. I went to sit in the captain's chair on the afterdeck, with my feet on the rail.

Coming along the dock was a blonde girl in a red and white striped shirt and blue pants. She waved a hand at me. "*Marina* ahoy!" Laura Mason called. I wasn't glad to see her. I didn't get up as she climbed over the rail.

I said, "I'd offer you a drink but I don't have any ice."

"I'd like a drink without ice," Laura said. She sat on the rail with her hands clasped in her lap. She looked very solemn.

I got up and made her a drink. "Thank you," she said with stiff formality when I handed it to her. She sipped the luke-warm highball, and I saw her struggling not to make a face. She said, "You'd left the hotel, so I thought you might be down here. I've been doing some detective work."

"Have you?" I said. I balanced the captain's chair on its two back legs and crossed my feet on the rail beside her.

"The Farrell you mentioned took Quaintance out sport-fishing several times—a little over a month ago. They were quite friendly ashore, too."

"Where did you find that out?"

Her eyes snapped at me. "Don't you believe me?"

"I think you're perfectly capable of lying about it. You want me to work for you, and since you can't order me to as you'd like you've decided to be tricky. I don't—"

I stopped as she put her glass down, swung her legs over the rail, and started to jump back down to the dock. I said, "As you go ashore bear in mind that you weren't invited aboard."

She turned. She swung her legs back. Her cheeks were flushed, her mouth set hard, but she was telling herself that she had to be nice to me. "You certainly got out of bed on the wrong side this morning," she said with an effort.

"I dislike dealing with tricky people, especially when they're snotty rich girls who think their wiles the wildest ever. The Masons throw a lot of weight around in Helios Beach, I'm sure—enough so you can go to the manager and tell him I'm to be chucked out. Thus accomplishing two things, you thought—one, if I'm to remain in Helios Beach I have to come stay at your house, which you feel would put me under an obligation; two, I was to think that Quaintance or America Incorporated had issued the order, which was to put my back up. My, you must have thought you were being clever."

When I finished she was wearing a shamefaced smile. "I just wanted to find out how clever you were," she said.

I grunted, expressing contempt.

"I'm sorry," Laura said, looking at me levelly. "It was a silly thing to do. But it's true about Quaintance and Farrell."

I was thinking of the other things that needed to be brought up now. I took a long drink, and a long time to light my pipe. "Let's see, now," I said. "Ideologically, what is it you object to so about Quaintance and America Incorporated? Not that they're after Communists?"

"The Communists killed my father," she said in a shaky voice.

"It's the way people like Quaintance go after them, is that it? Their end is good but their means bad. Innocent people get hurt and even ruined. And they are as corrupt as what they maintain they are fighting. All that sort of thing. Right?"

She nodded slightly, warily, tight-lipped.

"Well, I object to you on the same grounds. From what I hear of Quaintance he is probably a pretty vile person. But I don't like being employed to *get* him. Any way, you said—by fair means or foul. It sounds an awful lot like the sort of thing his kind does, that you claim you object to."

Laura sat up a little straighter; her mouth grew tighter; her face turned white in the finger-stripes again.

I said, "And I didn't like the way you used the word 'fascist' yesterday. It sounded a little too much like the way

the people you don't like use the word 'communist' about the people they don't like. You hate them so, you said. You hate them so, and they scare you silly. You sound very much as though you'd fallen into the same trap—different compartment—that they've fallen into. No, if I were going to fight these people I certainly don't think I'd want you for a sponsor. I don't think you have the right attitude."

"Aren't you tricky!" Laura said in a harsh voice. Her eyes were snapping again. "Moralizing old— Well, I didn't come here for a fatherly lecture." She stopped, took a stiff drink, then looked down at her glass and said, "And I don't have to drink this swill if I don't like it." She poured my liquor over the side.

She put the glass down on the rail. "I'd like you to help me," she said. "But I'm not going to get on my knees. You can go to—"

"I'll make a deal with you," I interrupted. "My own terms. I'd like to stay at your house and have a closer look at Quaintance—but under no obligation to do anything for you. What do you say to that?"

"Fine. And if I ever happen to be on your boat again I don't have to feel any obligation to drink your cheap liquor without ice. What do you say to that?"

"Fine," I said. "Now, what's the story when I come up there?"

Her forehead wrinkled reflectively. "I'd better talk to Dick first. I think—Well, meet me in the hotel bar this afternoon about five, and we'll have something figured out. Something tricky," she said.

"Make it six or so. I've got something to do first."

She nodded curtly. She swung her legs over the railing again. Then she turned her head and said over her shoulder, "I read somewhere that men smoke pipes because they think it makes them look strong and masculine and wise." She jumped lightly to the dock and strode back along it in her striped shirt and blue slacks, her blonde head held high. I grinned after her.

I was sitting in my car in front of the Farrell house when Mary Farrell drove up behind me in the old Chevrolet a little after five-thirty. In the rear-view mirror I watched her get out—a big, heavy, red-faced woman in a faded black dress. She glanced at me without expression as she walked tiredly up to the front door, carrying a small brown-paper bag of groceries. She left the door open, and I followed her inside.

In the living room she took a cigarette and a Zippo lighter from her purse. She stood in front of the fireplace to light the cigarette; it took her three tries. Her eyes when she looked at me were like small dark marbles in her red face.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know who killed Billy, Mary."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said in a cracked voice. "Who told you that? You must be drunk."

"Who was he running dope for?"

"Running dope!" she said, and I couldn't tell whether the contempt in her voice was real or feigned. "What the old gossips in this town won't think up! Who—"

"I've seen the motor in that boat, Mary. He was running something in from Mexico. I want to know who killed him. Who was it?"

"Nobody killed him!" she cried. "He fell off the pier."

"He didn't fall off the pier. Somebody cracked his skull and threw him off, and then knocked a piece of railing off to make it look as though he'd fallen. And you know who it was."

She shook her head wildly. "You're crazy!" she stood before the fireplace, before the mantel where the photographs of Billy and their daughter Mirrilees were, as though she were protecting them from me.

"Was it you, Mary?"

"Sure," she whispered. "Sure. Anything. Oh, go away and leave me alone!" Fat, shining tears squeezed out of her eyes

and streaked her cheeks, but through the tears her eyes watched me with hatred and fear.

"I'm going to find out who it was," I said.

She lowered her head and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. When she looked up again her voice was pleading. "Please leave it alone, Steve. He would have wanted you to leave it alone."

"Let me judge for myself."

She shook her head. She raised her cigarette to her lips and drew on it. Then she said, "All that happened was that he got drunk and fell off the pier. I don't see why you have to—"

"When the railing broke."

"Yes, when the railing broke."

I sat down in the flowered chair where I had seen Quaintance last night, wondered about mentioning him, and decided not to. I lit my pipe, stared at her, and tried silence.

After a long time she said, "I didn't push him off the pier, Steve. I was playing canasta with some friends that night—till after two. I can prove it."

"When did you find the piece of railing?"

Her face turned to suet.

"You knew right away what had happened," I said gently. "You must have, to look for the piece of railing and find it before the deputy did. Who killed Billy, Mary?"

Her shoulders sagged. She sat down on the davenport with her heavy legs slightly spread and her head leaning back against the top of the couch, staring up at the ceiling. She shook her head slowly from side to side.

"If you didn't kill him yourself, then there's another reason why you'd have that piece of wood hidden out in the garage."

She only shook her head, slowly, tiredly.

"So now you're going to use blackmail to give her the best," I said. "You're very stupid. Billy was a threat to the murderer, so the murderer killed him. Do you think you're not a threat too? Why should he stop at killing you, when he's already killed Billy? You said yesterday you hadn't

told your daughter Billy was dead yet. Maybe you can just wait and have some stranger tell her you're both dead."

She didn't speak, staring up at the ceiling.

"And who's going to give her the best then?" I went on. "Who's going to blackmail the murderer then for the money to pay the hospital bills? Who—"

"You're wasting your time," Mary Farrell said in a hoarse voice. "I'm not going to tell you anything. I don't know what you're talking about anyway."

"Mary, listen—"

"I'm not going to talk to you any more," she said.

And she didn't. I tried to make her mad and I tried to scare her, but she didn't say another word. She just sat there with her big hands clasped in her lap, staring down at them, with her mouth tight closed and the tears leaking steadily down her red cheeks. After a while I left.

9

I met Laura Mason in the bar a few minutes after six. She wore a brown dress with a high collar, her hair was done up in a knot at the back, and she looked fine. The bartender nodded to me. There were several other couples in the bar, and Laura and I moved to a booth. The bartender brought me my highball; Laura was drinking a whisky sour.

"I talked to Dick," she said. "It's difficult, because you were in here talking to Edie last night. Edie was drunk and may not remember, but Russie will." She gave me a cold glance, as though I had erred badly.

"How old are you, Laura?" I asked.

"Twenty-two," she said, "though I don't see what concern it is of yours." But some of her iciness seemed to melt. She nervously slid her silver bracelet up and down her brown arm. Around her neck, on a fine silver chain, hung a twisted, smashed bit of metal.

"What's the good-luck piece?"

"Just a good-luck piece."

"It's a bullet, isn't it?"

She nodded slightly and raised a hand to roll it between her fingers. It looked like a .38 slug. She wouldn't have worn it unless she wanted it commented on, but maybe she enjoyed being mysterious about it. She was only twenty-two.

"From the last war?" I asked. "Your father?"

"Nothing like that. Now, listen. You're going up to the house as my guest. I picked you up, or maybe you picked me up—here. I often pick men up and bring them home. I asked Russie down for a weekend the first time I met him. You're to make a little play for me, just for show. I don't care what you say you are—travelling salesman or whatever—fisherman— That doesn't matter, but—"

"Aren't I a little out of your age group?"

She smiled; first it was chill, then it was a little piece of the smile that so strangely transfigured her face. "I've always liked older men," she said. "Partly it's because Edie runs after young men, and I like the contrast. But the fact has been established. Do you think you can appear to be interested in me?"

"I'll do my best."

Her fingers still toyed with the battered bullet. I took out my pipe and started to fill it.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I wish you wouldn't smoke that when we're together. I'm allergic to pipe smoke." But she flushed as she said it, and something I didn't understand flickered in her eyes. I put my pipe away. Laura Mason was going to take a lot of understanding. She offered me a Parliament cigarette, which I took and thanked her for and lit.

"Well, hello!" a friendly voice said. Newman stood before us, wearing a wide, toothy grin. Behind the squarish horn-rimmed glasses his eyes were magnified hugely.

Laura gave him a rude glance. "Hello," she said. "Mr. Summers, Mr. Newman."

"Hello, Mr. Newman," I said and put out my hand.

He pumped it up and down, showing me his long white

teeth. "I wish you'd call me Art. Are you here for our convention, Mr. Summers?"

"Laura's trying to convince me I should stay for it."

"Good for Laura!" He pumped my hand again and released it with reluctance. "You're looking most attractive, Laura," he said. "You really are." I received another presentation of white teeth and magnified eyes. "Where are you from, Mr. Summers?"

"Singer's Harbour," I said. "That's in the—"

"Singer's Harbour," he interrupted, and shook his head, frowning. "Singer's Harbour. I don't think we have a chapter there, have we?"

"It's a very small place. It's in the northern part of the state."

"Well, I'm really not very familiar with it up there—although we've been very active around the Bay lately." He appropriated the bench beside Laura. "My bailiwick is Southern California. I must say I've been enjoying the Hollywood people very much. Do you happen to know Gordon Gregory, Mr. Summers?"

I said I didn't. Laura was hastily draining her glass.

"A very wonderful guy," Newman said. "Laura, you've heard this joke of Gordie's, but I'm sure Mr. Summers will enjoy it. It seems that there were three—"

"Maybe you could tell it to Mr. Summers sometime when I don't have to hear it again," Laura said, and slid out of the booth past him. "We're due for dinner at the house right this minute."

I got out of the booth too and expressed regret. Newman looked at us with the broad, stiff, dental smile. "I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Newman," I said.

"Call me Art, won't you?" he said.

I took Laura's arm, and we left the bar. "My God, he's awful," she said as we passed through the lobby. "Those eyes."

Outside, she laughed and said, "Once I told Edie that if she married Quaintance I'd marry Art. Russie brought Art down with him a few times before they started getting

ready for the convention, and Edie simply can't stand him. I think he makes her flesh crawl, really physically crawl—his terrible raw jokes when she's *such a lady*."

We moved across the hotel parking lot toward her car. "He and the Gard woman aren't staying at your house?" I asked.

"No, at the hotel. I told you Edie can't bear him. Russie and his thug are the only ones at the house."

"His thug?"

"George Roney. He's supposed to have been a football star somewhere. He lives out in the chauffeur's apartment—because he was a big college athlete, and Russie wants to show he's superior to big college athletes, I suppose because he wasn't one. I guess Roney's really just a bodyguard. You see, lots of times Quaintance meets men who want to punch him in the nose. If they're his size—he's small, you know, not much taller than I—he handles them himself. He's a good boxer. I saw him knock a man down at the party where I met him. But Roney's always nearby to handle the ones Russie can't."

I helped Laura into her car. In my car I followed her Oldsmobile across the highway and up the hill, at the top of which, above the treetops, I could see a great grey castle of a house with a broad front of windows. Laura turned into a bricked courtyard before the house. I parked beside her; already in the courtyard were the cream-coloured Cadillac, a new Lincoln convertible, and Dick's MG. I got out and joined Laura. It was almost dark, and the towering cypress that spread its branches over the courtyard made black, changing shapes against the sky. A yellow bug-repellent bulb burned over an enormous door with iron braces. Laura jerked a chain beside the door, setting off a chorus of Swiss bell-ringers inside.

A spare old man with a pink bald head opened the door. "Good evening, Miss Laura."

"This is Mr. Summers, Rawles. He'll be staying with us awhile. His bag's in the car."

Rawles looked at me with disfavour, bowed slightly, said,

"How do you do, sir?" and moved outside to get my suitcase. I followed Laura down a wide brown-tiled hall. She walked with her shoulders held erect, her heels rapping harshly on the tiles, her elbows close to her sides. We came into a room the size of a tennis court, with a wall of windows showing a Cineramic expanse of trees and ocean; a huge brick fireplace; a great many pieces of heavy, dark wood, Spanish-Colonial furniture, which were dwarfed and made to look inadequate by the size of the room; and a TV set that was not dwarfed. Edith Mason came toward us, looking very regal in a black dinner dress. Behind her was Russell Quaintance, and on the other side of the room Dick Mason sat, looking up from a magazine.

Laura introduced me to her stepmother, who did not appear to recognize me. I was presented with Edie's small, soft hand, and a small, soft, insincere smile. "I'm very happy to meet you, Mr. Summers," Edith Mason said. "Laura always manages to bring the most interesting people home with her."

She appropriated me very neatly from Laura, which gave me a minor insight into some of Laura's feelings about her, and, with her hand on my arm, guided me to Quaintance.

Quaintance's face was as coldly perfect as that of some marble Apollo. His handclasp was hard and quick, but he produced his charming smile, and his greeting was cordial. His eyes quickly examined my worn flannel slacks and the leather patches on the elbows of my tweed jacket, and I could sense the instant calculation, first as to the original quality of my clothes, then as to their age and state of repair, finally as to the philosophy involved—impecuniousness could be dismissed, but studied indifference was suspicious, and nonconformism Quaintance would not like at all. In turn, I had been trying not to pre-form any opinions of him personally, but I found myself disliking him intensely.

I was escorted off to meet Dick, who had risen. "How do you do, sir?" he said and shook my hand. When Edith Mason had turned me back toward Laura and Quaintance

once more he did not take up his magazine again, but neither did he join us. Quaintance was lighting Laura's cigarette. A man with a tray of drinks appeared.

"I'd like a whisky sour, George," Laura said. "Steve?"

I said a highball would be fine. George Roney looked at me. He must have weighed two hundred and twenty pounds, some of which was turning to fat. He had the stupidly clever, cruel face of the tackle who is always assigned the task of crippling the opposing star halfback. "Water or soda?"

"Water," I said, and he moved off. Despite his heft he had a certain grace. His shoulders in the loud houndstooth jacket were ridiculously huge.

Edie, who was sipping a martini, urged me on to the couch beside her, leaving Laura sitting alone. Quaintance was inserting a cigarette into his silver holder. "And what do you do, Mr. Summers?" Edie asked.

I said I had a fishing boat.

"Oh, how interesting!"

"Sportfishing?" Quaintance asked. He regarded me with his sapphire chips of eyes, digesting the information and renewing his calculations.

"No, commercial. I'll be going south after albacore soon."

"What kind of boat do you have?" Quaintance asked pleasantly, and, when I answered, asked the name of the boat, where I was from, how long I was planning on staying in Helios Beach, how I had happened to come here.

"Russie went out after yellowtail quite a few times, a month or so ago," Laura broke in, and looked pleased with herself.

"I'd heard that it was a very good year for yellowtail down here," I said. "Did you catch any in the derby class?"

"No, just small ones. I haven't had much experience fishing."

"Did you go on one of the sportfishers out of San Diego?"

"Good God, no!" Quaintance said. "Those miserable masses of humanity!" He looked insulted. I waited to see if he would feel a pressure to explain how he had gone, and

hoped that Laura would keep quiet and not force the issue. Quaintance dismissed the subject with, "I guess I'm not much of a fisherman. I found it pretty dull."

Roney came back with Laura's whisky sour and my highball. It was good liquor. Laura was watching me.

Before Quaintance could get back to his interrogation I said, "I noticed your ring. The designs are Tarascan, aren't they?"

He doubled up his fist and looked at the ring, which was a heavy silver one. I had surprised him by recognizing the designs, pleased him by admiring the ring. "Yes," he said, "Tarascan."

"Mexico is such a fascinating country," Edie said. "I think Mexico City itself so beautiful. Laura loves the bullfights, don't you, Laura?"

"Bullfighters," Laura said, and sounded like a sulky little girl. Edie said, "Russie spent six months down there not long ago. After those horrible—"

Quaintance turned toward her casually, and she stopped as though he had slapped her.

"Where were you?" I asked Quaintance.

"A little place called San Juan Cautlan in Michoacán." He leaned forward, giving the knees of his trousers delicate little hikes, and smiling. "Quite a wonderful little place. The men all call you 'Don,' and you can get maids for two pesos a day and tortillas—happy to work sixteen hours a day. The people are almost all Indios. If you don't keep after them they're insufferably stupid and lazy, but they know their place and yours. I can't tolerate the Mexicans themselves—the *mestizos*. They—"

"They think they're as good as you are," Laura said.

Quaintance looked at her.

"Laura," Edie said in a muffled voice, "please." She put her hand on Quaintance's hand.

Quaintance said lightly, "Always the touchy little liberal."

"Please, let's not fight," Edie whispered.

Laura rose. "Steve, would you like to see more of the house? It's supposed to be quite a showplace."

I said I would. Edie smiled wanly as I excused myself. Dick was watching us from his chair; Roney had taken over the magazine and was sitting with his head bent down toward it, as though he were nearsighted. Laura and I crossed the room and went out a door on to a balcony in front of the windows. Below were the lights of houses showing through the trees, the pile of lights of the hotel, the swiftly flowing river of lights that was the highway, the frail white light that marked the end of the pier.

"It's so damn hard to keep your mouth shut," Laura said, leaning on the rail beside me.

"I can see how it might be."

"Dick's better at it than I am, but Dick has better manners. But it's so hard. Well, here we have the view from the Masons' balcony. Fine, isn't it?"

"Very impressive," I said. Bordering the street along the Mason property, angling steeply downhill, was a stone wall about six feet high. A hundred yards or so below us, inside the wall, was a stone cottage with a gabled roof. The cottage had its own driveway and garage, and one of its windows showed a light. "What's the little house?"

"It's the guest house. We rent it. Dad said to rent it during the last war when housing was so scarce, and we never really stopped. The Creep lives there."

"Who's the Creep?"

"His name's Black, and he's writing a book. Dick calls him the Creep because he's a little mysterious. He hardly ever goes out except late in the afternoon, and we never see anything of him. Dick says he sees him walking along the beach sometimes when he's surfing late. Now let's go look at the swimming pool. It's my joy and salvation."

We went back through the living room. Dick was sitting with Quaintance and Edie now, and George Roney had drawn up a chair with them too. The pool was in the patio—a fifty-footer with underwater lights. The patio was illuminated by floodlights. Around the incredible, enticing blue of the pool was a lip of blue tile. There was an L of smoothly raked white sand on which beach furniture was scattered.

Along two sides of the patio was a roofed gallery, and there were rooms opening off it.

"It's a nice pool, isn't it? Laura said. "I like to swim."

"You look like you might be a good swimmer."

She turned toward me. "Compliment?"

"Compliment."

"Thank you. Your room is the third one from the left there. Do you want to go back inside now and be a detective again?"

We started back. I took her arm. The flesh was cool, and there were muscles beneath it. In the living room we joined the others, and again I was deftly separated from Laura and seated beside Edie on the couch.

Dick Mason was saying doggedly, "Just the same, I know none of that stuff went on up at Stanford. I—"

"You know none of it went on?" Quaintance said in a cold voice.

"Well, I was on the team. wasn't I?"

"How do you know none of it went on? You just said you didn't know why you lost to UCLA."

"Well, we shouldn't have lost, but—"

"But this—what was his name?—Cox. Cox only made ten points. You admit that you would have beaten UCLA if Cox had done as well as he usually did, don't you?"

Roney laughed mockingly. Edie was smiling at Dick, but the flesh around Dick's mouth was pale, and his eyes were wide and angry.

"He had an off day is all!" Dick said. "And they had two men on him every minute. They—"

"No other team had ever had two men on him?"

"Well, goddammit—"

"Oh, now, Dick," Edie said.

"Well, Jimmy Cox's a friend of mine! Sure I know basket-ball guys've taken bribes in some of those big-deal games back East, but—"

"But not Jimmy Cox," Quaintance said. He tapped the silver cigarette holder on the arm of his chair. He laughed. "You know, I think that all college athletes are professionals

anyway, and a smart professional never balks at making a little more money. Isn't that right, George?"

"That's sure right, Russ," Roney said.

"Then I guess there aren't very many smart ones," Dick said, and I heard Laura say beneath her breath, "Good boy, Dick."

Quaintance laughed again. It was not a nasty laugh, but he was enjoying this very much. "You don't have to make any more money, a young millionaire like you. Do you?" He leaned forward slowly and then with a quick jerk of his head looked up at Dick and snapped, "But is your friend Jimmy Cox a millionaire too?"

Dick just sat there. For a moment he looked as though he would get up and leave, then as though he were going to cry. But finally he smiled a sick smile and said hoarsely, "Well, as a matter of fact, his folks are loaded as hell," and it was very obviously a lie.

Quaintance tapped the holder on the arm of his chair, smiling.

Dick said, "I guess I ought to know. He's my best friend."

Quaintance raised an eyebrow. Roney grinned behind his hand. Laura was sitting up stiffly in her chair, and I saw that she was careful not to look at her brother.

"Oh, there's Rawles at last," Edie said. "Shall we go in?"

Dinner was not a very pleasant meal. Edie tried valiantly to manage the conversation, but Dick was politely sullen, Laura completely silent, and Quaintance preoccupied. George Roney did not eat with us. I tried to get Quaintance into a conversation about fishing so as to work back to his yellowtail expeditions with Farrell, but without success. While we were sitting uncomfortably over liqueurs and cigarettes Quaintance looked at his watch, said, "It's eight-thirty," and rose abruptly.

"Oh, it's time for the programme!" Edie said. "Shall we go into the living room?"

As I pushed my chair back and got up I saw that Dick, across the table from me, looked as though he were getting ready to explode.

In the living room Quaintance was leaning over the huge TV set. "*This Is the Red Parade!*" an ominous, lisping voice from the TV said, and the picture tube flickered into life to show a fat-faced, jolly-looking man with bristling eyebrows, sitting at a huge desk with a pile of documents before him, a flag on the wall behind him. He was Warren Raile, the columnist and radio and TV commentator. He had sailed under a cloud during and after World War II as a possible Nazi sympathizer, and had undergone an ambiguous un-American activities investigation. But he had managed to stick it out until the pendulum swung the other way, and now he was a very powerful and influential man indeed. I saw Edie move to stand with her hand on Dick's shoulder while Quaintance bent again to trim the picture. Laura and I sat down together where we could see the TV screen.

Dick Mason said in a high voice, "Jesus H. Christ! Just because he writes for this silly thing do we have to look at it every week, for Christ's sake?"

Quaintance didn't look at him or even appear to have heard. Edie whispered, "Now, Dick, we have a guest. Let's not have this terrible bickering in front of Mr. Summers."

"Bickering!" Dick said and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his sweater. "I'm not bickering, I'm just not going to listen to that son-of-a-bitching liar—everybody knows he's a liar." He brushed forward past Quaintance and snapped the set off.

"Oh, now, Dick, dear—"

Laura's hand gripped my arm. In profile her face looked eager and almost fierce. Her other hand was at her throat, touching the mangled bit of lead.

Quaintance said calmy, "If you don't want to hear this you can leave the room." He turned the set on again.

"You don't tell me to leave the room!" Dick said in a shrill voice. Edie put out her hand for his, but he jerked away. "My father's money bought that TV set, and he'd break it up with a goddam axe if he knew we ever watched stuff like that on it. My father—"

"Oh, shut up," Quaintance said.

"Don't tell me to shut up either!" Dick looked very tall and young, frightened and angry. "I'll tell you what," he cried. "Dad's money paid for it, but he's dead—so now it's mine and Laura's and Edie's, and I'll give you my third, and I'll bet Laura'll give you hers, and I'll tell you what. You can take it right up to bed with you if you love that dirty—"

Quaintance slapped him hard across the mouth. Dick's head jerked back. I heard Laura make a hissing sound. Dick yelled something wordless and swung a long arm, which Quaintance knocked aside neatly. Quaintance checked him with a left, then, with a hard, neat right to the chin, knocked Dick down. Dick scrambled up immediately and charged.

"Dick!" Edie cried. "Dick Mason, you're to stop this brawling!"

And Dick stopped. He stood there with his arms at his sides, looking at Edie, his face agonized. On the TV screen Raile was holding up a handful of documents. His lips were moving, but the sound was not turned up, and his words were not audible.

"Oh, Dick, Dick, Dick," Laura whispered.

Quaintance leaned on the TV set and touched a dial. Raile's voice came booming and lisping into the room. Dick turned away from Edie and started slowly for the entry hall. He began to run. He disappeared down the hall, and over the sound of Raile's voice I heard the front door slam. Quaintance tuned the picture in just right and the sound in just right, sat down, and, with his hands folded in his lap and a slight critical frown on his handsome face, sat watching Warren Raile as though there had been no disturbance at all.

Warren Raile shook the documents at his viewers and talked about subversive activities in the Department of Defence.

"Let's get out of here," Laura whispered.

We went out into the patio and sat down in two of the striped canvas chairs on the sand. Laura was sniffing. "That

poor kid," she said. "Do you know what he's doing now? He's feeling guilty because he made a scene. He's feeling just terrible because he hurt Edie. Because he hurt *her*," she said bitterly.

We sat staring into the blue of the pool. Her fingers were touching the bullet that hung around her neck.

"Dad had such rotten luck with women," she went on more calmly. "Mother was bad enough, and then Edie. But maybe it's not her fault; maybe she's just a bitch dog and can't help it. Every boy I ever brought home from college she made a play for—and of course she could take any one of them away from me that she wanted to. She did take one away." She stopped.

"I haven't ever told anyone else about it," she said and stopped again. Then she said, "Who was there to tell? I couldn't have told Dick."

"Al Chalmers," she went on. "He was a senior, and I was a freshman. All the girls were wild about him. He was probably a terribly dull boy, but I was in love with him and I brought him down here to spend Christmas vacation. Edie made a play for him, and in a day or two he'd forgotten me. Dad found them together. I don't think it was the first time he'd caught her with somebody, either. But he was nice about it—always so damn nice and gentle—and he just told Al he'd better leave. Edie pretended she was drunk and didn't know what she was doing. Then later I saw him—Dad—with a revolver; I saw him out the living-room window, going down the lawn toward that little grove of eucalyptus trees. I thought he was going to kill himself, and I was frozen; I couldn't move or yell or do anything." She said in a different voice, "I suppose some part of me wanted him to kill himself so that would be her fault too. So I could hate her that much more.

"But he only shot at one of the trees three or four times and then came back. A long time afterward I went down and dug out one of the bullets with a knife—it was awfully hard to do, and the knife slipped, and I cut my hand." She paused for a long time. "And every once in a while, on

special occasions, I wear it, and I always feel like a silly, affected, melodramatic ass for doing it. But poor Dad."

I took out my pipe and chewed on the bit. Laura's hands worked together in her lap and she stared at the soft, bright blue of the pool.

"And poor Dick," she said. "When Dad was in Korea before he was captured—and after he was captured, before we knew he was dead—Dick was like—who was Ulysses' son?"

"Telemachus."

"Like Telemachus, and Dad was Ulysses. And Edie—whatever the wife's name was—Penelope. Only Edie didn't weave a tapestry and tear it apart every night. She went to bars at night. There was always a man around, and Dick was trying so hard not to let the men get to first base and not to think anything bad about Edie. The poor kid."

"But I think I feel sorrier for you," I said.

She swung suddenly toward me. "What?" she said in a harsh voice. "Oh, no. Oh, don't be sorry for—" She began to cry. She cried great, hard sobs, her hands covering her face, and her fingers working in her hair. I moved my chair closer to hers and put my arm around her. She pressed her face against my chest and cried there like that for a long time.

Finally she straightened up. "Sorry," she said. She got to her feet. "Let's go in and have a drink. Edie and Russie have gone down to the hotel by now, or else she's up in bed with her sleeping pills and he's gone alone. Let's go in and have a drink. Pardon me a minute while I go repair the ravages."

I went inside and over to the big windows, and stood staring down at the guest house where the Creep lived. The single light still burned in the window.

When Laura came in, her eyes were swollen, which gave her an Oriental look. Her mouth was sloppily painted bright red. "An evening at the Masons'," she said. I saw that she had taken off the chain with the pendant bullet. She stood by the TV set, slapping her hand gently up and down on its

polished top.

"What do you want to drink? Something strong, I imagine." She swung around nervously as footsteps sounded in the hall.

Dick came slouching in, hands in pockets. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," Laura said.

He came over toward us. The side of his jaw was swollen and discoloured. "Say, I'm sorry I made a crummy scene like that, Mr. Summers. That was pretty lousy."

"Don't apologize to me."

"Got a little bruise, didn't you?" Laura said.

"Yeah." He touched his jaw and laughed shortly.

He sat down and stretched his long legs out and locked his hands together on top of his head. Watching him, I thought very highly of Colonel Mason, the father of these two. "Do you know what I did?" Dick said. "I went booming out of here, and there was that damn flash Cad parked all over the place so I was going to have a hell of a time getting the MG out past it. I got frustrated and frustrated, and finally I stuck a matchstick in the valve and let all the air out of one of his front tyres. Fixed him." He laughed once more. "Boy, how jerk can you get?"

Laura laughed and moved over to where he was sitting.

"What a jerk!" Dick said and shook his head at me. "I guess he and Edie had to take the Lincoln to go out. Well, maybe he'll get one of those cashmere suits all dirty changing that tyre tomorrow."

I got out my pipe, filled it, and had started to light it when I remembered Laura's edict.

"Roney'll change it," Laura said. "He'll love doing it for Russ."

"Hell, I know," Dick said.

Laura leaned down and kissed him. "Oh, Dick, I know just how you feel."

"I was great tonight," Dick said. "I'm sorry about tonight, Mr. Summers," he said again. "But I've been pretty upset lately—thinking about Dad and all a lot. You know, you look a hell of a lot like him sometimes—especially

with that pipe. That's how I knew you from the picture in the paper, because Laura and I'd said how much you looked like Dad. He had a big old stinky pipe just like that one."

I took the big old stinky pipe out from between my teeth and put it in my pocket. Laura stood stiffly in front of Dick. Then she ran across the room, her high heels making a cracking sound, and out into the patio.

"Hey, what the hell's the matter with her?" Dick said, rising.

I didn't answer.

"I guess I'd better go see. Pardon me a minute."

"Dick, I wouldn't if I were you. Sometimes they just want to be left alone."

"Maybe so." He shook his head. "What a night! It's not quite this bad around here every night, Mr. Summers."

"Tell me about the Creep," I said.

"Who? Oh." Dick came over to me, and we stood together, looking down at the guest house. "Well, I don't know too much about him. You hardly ever see the guy, except he takes walks along the beach, I think about every night—about sunset. He's writing a book or something. Foreign-type guy; he speaks English-English. You know?"

"How long's he been here?"

"About a month, I guess. Russie knew him, or something, and he was looking for a quiet place to write this book."

"Nobody sees much of him?"

"Well, Russie goes down there about every day, and I guess George picks up groceries and stuff for him at the store. Sometimes there'll be other cars down there. When you see him he's unsocial as hell. I guess he thinks about his book all the time and doesn't want to be bothered. But he's pretty much of a creep."

I gazed down at the little house where Mr. Black, who was a friend of Russell Quaintance's, was living. Mr. Black sounded worth looking into.

"Are you going to work for us, Mr. Summers?" Dick asked.

"Not exactly," I said. "But I may be of some help."

He didn't know what I meant. He grimaced and rubbed a hand over his bristling hair. "Well—" he began. Then he said, "Say, I'm awfully damn bushed, Mr. Summers. I wonder if you'd—"

"I'd like to go to bed myself. Could you get that butler to bring me a highball?"

"He's gone to bed for sure. He makes himself scarce when there's any kind of a frassle going on. I'll go make you a drink. You want a stiff one?"

"Pretty stiff," I said.

two

I

I was awakened by a sporadic creaking sound. I lay with my eyes open, staring at the ceiling pattern of dark wood beams and light stucco, listening and trying to identify the voice. Finally I got up to look out the window. The patio was filled with brilliant sunlight; the sound was the diving board. I watched Quaintance do a one-and-a-half. A moment later he came out of the water again, dripping, climbed up on the board, bounced, dived cleanly and expertly. Laura, in a white two-piece bathing suit and dark glasses, sat in one of the canvas chairs, watching him.

By the time I had shaved, dressed, and gone outside, the creaking had stopped and Quaintance was gone. Laura was in the pool in a white bathing cap, swimming; she swam a length with an effortless, slow-seeming crawl that was not slow, turned, swam another length, another, and another. Finally she stopped and, holding herself against the edge of the pool and panting a little, looked up at me.

"Come on in, the water's fine."

"I haven't any trunks with me."

"We've got some spares lying around."

"Good. I want to get my dark glasses from the car, though." I went through the house, where a maid in a white cap was emptying ashtrays into a dustpan. Outside, George Roney was changing the left front tyre of the Cadillac convertible, sitting down and grunting as he lifted the spare on to the bolts. A long-handled chrome lug wrench lay on the bricks beside the hubcap, its handle brilliant in the sun. Roney looked up as I passed him, nodding and uttering a grunt with a slightly different intonation. I grunted back

and got my dark glasses from the glove compartment of my car.

"George!" a voice called, and Roney said, "Ho!"

Quaintance stood in the doorway of the house, wearing a beige cashmere suit that looked soft as a cloud. His blonde hair was still damp. "Hurry it up, will you?" he said. "I've got to get to Los Angeles."

"About two minutes, Russ," Roney said. "Two minutes, and it's done." He stood up and swung the chrome lug wrench around on a lug.

Then Quaintance saw me. He had taken his holder and a pack of cigarettes from his pocket; his hand, raising the holder to his lips, halted. "Good morning, Summers. Not leaving?"

"No," I said, and he looked pleased. "Beautiful morning," I said.

"Very."

"Sudden trip?"

He nodded; something flickered in his eyes. "Sudden trip," he said. Quaintance would have an inquisitive or suspicious mind; probably the sudden trip was to find out if Stephen Summers was all he seemed. Quaintance watched me as I moved up the steps and past him through the great door.

"One more lug and it's done, Russ," I heard Roney call.

Laura was lying prone on the tiles beside the pool. Drops of water gleamed on her brown back. "I hope they fit," she called. A pair of well-worn blue trunks hung by their drawstring from my doorknob. As I carried them inside I had a strong hunch that they had belonged to Colonel Richard Mason. They fitted well enough.

Laura watched me through her dark glasses as I crossed the patio to the pool. I sat down beside her and dangled my legs in the water.

"And I thought I had a good early tan," she said.

"It takes longer to get one lying beside a pool."

"Don't be snobbish. Are you going in the water or not? Afterward we'll have some breakfast. Come on, I'll race

you a length." She took off her glasses and got to her feet. We stood poised together on the edge of the pool and dived when I counted three. I churned along as best I could, aware that a lot of energy was going into not much speed. When my wrist banged the end of the pool and I raised my head, Laura was sitting up on the edge, laughing down at me.

"Beat you by half a length. You looked like a Mississippi river sidewheeler."

I pulled myself up beside her, panting. I was very much aware of the seventeen years I had on her, and the awareness affected me as such things rarely do.

"You don't mind if I crow, do you?" Laura said. "But I've been feeling inferior and naïve and young ever since I met you. It's nice to feel superior in certain provinces."

"We could play some Ping-pong if you really want to feel superior," I said, and got my dark glasses and put them on.

"Don't be an old bear." She got up. "I'm going to tell Cook to bring us some breakfast. Do you want coffee first?"

"Yes," I said. "Black."

"Good. So do I." She trotted off toward the house.

We had breakfast together under one of the beach umbrellas, and she was cheerful and full of fun, an altogether different Laura Mason. I wondered what had caused the change in her. As soon as we had finished she went to put her clothes on, while I lay in the sun.

A voice said, "Good morning, Mr. Summers," and I sat up. Edith Mason had come out into the patio. She too wore dark glasses; her rich dark brown hair with the dramatic slash of grey hung loose around her shoulders. She had on a navy blue tailored robe and high-heeled white slippers. In one of her hands was a martini glass, in the other a silver shaker. "Please, let's go over in the shade," she said. "I find the sun almost intolerably bright."

We sat down beneath one of the umbrellas, and Edie put the cocktail shaker down on a metal table. Her hand was very steady, but in the sunlight her face looked older, tired and dissipated.

"I must apologize for last night," she said in a low voice.

"I don't know what could have possessed Dick. He's usually so well mannered." She took out a cigarette, and I lit it for her. Her hand with its diamond rings and long pink fingernails touched mine.

"Dick seems a fine boy," I said.

"And of course you highly approve of Laura too." She gave me a pale motherly smile.

I smiled back.

"We've always gotten along awfully well," she went on, and sipped her martini. "We've gotten along very well for stepmother and stepchildren. Of course it's hard sometimes."

"Like now," I said.

"Yes." She drank again. She drank at regular intervals, her hand rising automatically with the glass, almost as though this were a kind of breathing. "Yes, I'm sure you've seen the situation. Neither Dick nor Laura likes Russie—although in Laura's case it's something quite different. It's very difficult for me." Her voice broke a little.

"Is my duty to them or to myself?" Edie went on. I watched her hand rise again, with a kind of fascination at the regularity of it. She poured more liquor into her glass. "After all, they're almost grown—Laura is a grown woman, and Dick will be out of college in another year. I've given up a lot for them, and now—" She paused a little too dramatically and turned toward me. "Isn't it my turn, Mr. Summers?"

"That's a decision you have to make for yourself, of course."

"Yes," she said. She turned away again. "Laura's very bitter against me," she said unhappily. "I can't blame her; she's young, and of course she's in love with Russie too. Did you know that, Mr. Summers?"

I said I hadn't known.

"Watch her. Her bitterness is jealousy. The fact that I should be attractive to someone a few years younger than I am is intolerable to her. She and Dick have done everything they could think of to destroy the relationship Russie

and I have—terrible things. What difference does it make if he's a few years younger than I if we're in love? Am I supposed to be faithful to a dead man all the rest of my life? Commit suttee?" She drank, drew on her cigarette. Now her hand was shaking.

"I was a good wife to him!" she said vehemently. "I never really loved him—oh, I respected him, I was grateful to him, that kind of love. But I never had the love every woman has a right to have. And I have it now, and no one is going to take it away from me—Dick or Laura, or anyone. Because it's the kind of love that's more important than anything else in the world; I have that. There's nothing more important than complete love, is there, Mr. Summers?"

"Oh, I think so."

"No—"

"Human dignity, and honour, and a person's solemn conscience."

"Words."

"No more than 'love' is a word."

"You sound very old and wise. I suppose I seem young and foolish."

"You sound as though you might be trying to be foolishly young."

"I threw my youth away," Edith Mason said. She drank, and looked off tragically into the past. Then she dropped her cigarette in the sand and immediately took out another. I lit it for her; again her hand touched mine. Out of the corners of my eyes I saw Laura, in a crisp blue cotton dress, come out of the door of her room, stand there a moment staring at us, then retreat and soundlessly close the door again.

"Now I have a second chance," Edie said. She was beginning to sound drunk. "But why can't Dick and Laura be happy for me?" she whispered. "I can't marry him against their—I can't yet—I—" She shook her head; her eyes were closed, her face tragic. "Why can't they be happy for me?" she said again. Abruptly she demanded, "Are you in love

with Laura, Mr. Summers? Or is this just a casual friendship?"

I said hastily that I hadn't thought about it.

But Edie wasn't listening. "Poor Laura needs a man so desperately," she said. "Laura should be in love and have someone love her. She loved her father too much. She's very neurotic. She was dismissed from college for cheating, you know."

Having delivered that gratuitous knife-thrust, she sighed gently. She turned her soft, tired, beautiful, ageing face toward me, and I felt very sorry for Dick and Laura, and for Colonel Richard Mason.

"I really must apologize again for that terrible scene last night," she said in a blurred voice. She poured the last of the martini in the shaker into her glass. "I was so ashamed of Dick," she said. "But I thought Russie acted with wonderful restraint, didn't you?"

Russie could have kicked Dick's teeth out, I suppose. "Yes, I think he did," I said.

She looked grateful. "Poor, poor Russie! He's had to be so strong. They've crucified him, the awful things they've said about him, the terrible lies. The left-wing papers and the Reds—when he's one of the few people in this country who've done anything against the Reds in high places." She shivered, and I saw her hand grip her glass tightly. "Oh, I know it's silly," she whispered, "but sometimes I feel that there's only Russie between this country and—and communism. He's such a personification of the patriot—working, working, giving everything for his country and not being appreciated. How could anyone blame him, when they'd fired him so cruelly and unjustly from that committee, for almost giving his country up? But he only stayed in Mexico six months; he came back, knowing that people would just go on saying filthy things about him." Suddenly she snapped, "I suppose you believe all the filthy things you've read about him?"

I said, "I read a great many things that I don't believe."

She patted my hand. "You've been so understanding, Mr.

Summers. You know, I think—I think you might be good for Laura. But I suppose you'll be like all the rest—lose interest in her quickly and go away."

For the first time I felt a little angry with her. I lit my pipe. Edie had drained her glass; she sat staring into it with her lips drawn into a judicious pout. She started as a door slammed open and Dick sprinted across the sand and dived into the pool, sending up a great spray of water.

A moment later his head appeared above the edge of the pool, and a long arm waved. "Hi, Edie. Hi, Mr. Summers."

"Good morning, dear!" Edie called in reply.

Dick dived back into the pool again and churned down it with a splashing, sinuous backstroke.

Edie struggled to her feet. Her voice was so blurred I could hardly understand her. "You'll have to excuse me now. I have a terrible headache." She raised her wrist to her forehead and winced with pain or the semblance of it, and started off toward the house. She moved uncertainly through the sand. I imagined that Dick was being punished with this performance, but I got up to take her arm.

She shook my hand off and said with enormous dignity, "If you please, I'm quite capable of walking by myself."

I stepped back and watched her slow, perilous progress across the sand and into the house.

2

After a while Dick came out of the pool and sat beside me in the chair Edie had vacated. The bruise on his jaw was yellowish this morning. "Was Edie pretty tight?" he asked worriedly.

"A little," I said. "Would you like to do a job for me today?"

"Sure; you name it."

"It involves going to San Diego."

"There's a couple of things on the MG I'd like to get checked at a garage down there anyway. What do you want

me to do?"

"I want a key file—you can get one at a good hardware store—a good magnifying glass, and a Cadillac key blank. I think any GM key blank will do, but find out."

Dick frowned at me. "For a Caddy," he said. "You going to let me in on what this is all about?"

"No, because if I'm mysterious about what I'm doing, and what I'm doing flops, then I don't lose face."

Dick grinned broadly. "Check."

"I'll give you some money as soon as I get my pants on."

"Keep your money. I get my allowance from the trustee the first of the month, and I'm still heavy. I wish I knew what it was all about, though."

I just grunted and went to my room to take a shower and dress. When I came out again Dick was gone and Laura was leaning against one of the posts that supported the gallery roof. I went over to her. Her face was sulky and wary-looking again; the change was as noticeable as though a light in her had been turned off.

"I suppose she told you all about me," she said.

"Not all."

"I'm sure she told you I'd been kicked out of school for cheating."

"She mentioned it."

"And that I had to go to a psychiatrist and—"

"Who found out you cheated in school because you were over-anxious to please your father with high grades," I broke in. "No, she didn't. Now you stay here and nurse your complexes for a while. I want to go on an expedition. How can I get around to the west side of the house without going out the front?"

She stared at me with hot, angry eyes. Then she jerked her head toward the far end of the patio. "The storeroom has a back door. You go along the side of the house—there's a walk. I'll show you."

"No, I want to go alone. There are times, like earlier this morning, when I enjoy your company. There are other moods of yours I don't like at all." I raised an eyebrow at

her and hung my pipe in my mouth, and she swung away to sit down in one of the beach chairs.

I went through a narrow, dim passage of a room where there were shovels, rakes, a power mower, and pool-cleaning gear, and out on the north side of the house. At the corner of the house I stopped, and just in time.

George Roney was almost above me, at the north end of the balcony, where he could not be seen through the windows. He was sitting in a straight chair, reading a magazine, but from time to time he glanced down at the guest house.

I moved quietly back around the corner and retraced my steps to the patio, where I sat down beside Laura.

"Well," I said. "Roney's doing some watching, and I'll give odds that Quaintance has gone to Los Angeles to find out who I am. I'll also give odds that soon after he gets back your stepmother is going to ask me to leave."

"She can't make you leave if Dick and I want you to stay."

I shook my head. "Open warfare has its disadvantages. Have you got a good camera?"

"Dad's. It's supposed to be wonderful."

"I'd like to use it later this afternoon."

"To take a picture of whom?"

"Of Mr. Black."

"Mr. Black!" she stared. "Is he important? Is he someone—"

"I don't know," I said. "But then genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains, isn't it?"

Laura remained sour and brooding—brooding, I was afraid, over the fight she was going to have with Edie when I was shown the door.

"Listen, Laura," I said. "I want to go down to the hotel about lunchtime and have a drink and something to eat. Do you think you could manage to pull yourself together and be a little more allegro for a couple of hours?"

She looked at me out of the corners of her eyes. She grinned a little. "Oh, all right. Just don't act so superior."

"I want you to introduce me to Erika Gard."

"That'll be gay," Laura said.

3

Laura said, "Here I am, drinking before lunch. I suppose underneath it all I secretly admire Edie and I'm trying to be like her."

We were alone in the bar, which had just opened. Down at the far end the bartender was polishing glasses. I should talk to him about the night Billy Farrell had died, I thought, and it occurred to me that my sights had shifted slightly from Billy's death, toward America Incorporated.

"Who told you that Quaintance had gone out sportfishing with Farrell?" I asked Laura.

"Mr. O'Donnell." She was leaning forward with her elbows on the bar, and she looked very young. "Mr. O'Donnell puts up phone orders in the grocery and delivers them; he's through about two and goes fishing. I thought he might have known your friend."

"I'd like to talk to O'Donnell."

"Go down to the pier later. He's almost always there."

I nodded. I had already talked to him briefly.

Laura looked at her watch. "We'll go into the dining room a little before one," she said. "They'll be in on the hour. Erika does everything by the numbers, and one o'clock is when one eats one's lunch. She's quite something. The kind of thoroughly unpleasant but—oh, impressive old battleaxe I've always thought Barbara Frietchie probably was. Was there really a Barbara Frietchie, or is she just in the poem?"

I said I didn't know, and she gave me a wide-eyed stare. "Goodness, you're getting more human by the minute. First I find I can beat you swimming, and now there's something you don't know."

"Well," I said, "in the future when you get into a foul mood we can go for a swim or play Twenty Questions."

A little before one o'clock we went into the dining room and sat down at a table for four. At precisely one Erika Gard and Newman came into the dining room, the national secretary of America Incorporated sailing in like a square-rigger before a freshening breeze, with Newman hurrying along on her port quarter. Laura waved and called to ask them to sit with us. Erika Gard changed her course in our direction. As we were introduced she gave me an intense stare out of her yellow eagle's eyes and said with a clipped, impatient enunciation, "How do you do, Mr. Summers?"

"How do you do, Miss Gard?" I shook hands with Newman, who had on a lighter grey Brooks Brothers' suit today. I helped Erika Gard into her chair. Her face beneath its layer of powder was the same grey-white colour as her hair. She wore pince-nez glasses on a cord around her neck; now she clipped them to her beak of a nose and examined the menu with distaste. Newman's magnified liquid eyes were watching me covertly through the horn-rimmed glasses, and I was sure I had been discussed last night when Quaintance had come down to the hotel after Raile's TV show.

"Everything going well?" Laura asked with a bright smile.

"It's a full-time proposition dealing with these TV people," Newman said. He shook his head worriedly, then smiled a forgiving smile. "But they're fun too."

"Helter-skelter people," Erika Gard said. "They are helter-skelter people. It's no wonder television is as poor as it is, considering the people who seem to be operating it. They are unable to take orders—completely incapable."

"Is the whole convention to be televised?" I asked.

"The opening day," Erika Gard said. Her eyes had a veiled look most of the time, but then, like the sun glinting suddenly on some bright object, they blazed out. "It's a fantastic expense," she said, "but I'm told it's a necessary one."

"Admiral Miles is going to give the opening address," Newman said. "Do you know him, Summers? A real old sea

dog—really a wonderful character.”

I said I didn’t know Admiral Miles.

“There will be a lot of the better Hollywood people here,” Newman said. “They’ll make wonderful incidental shots for the cameras. Gordon Gregory will be master of ceremonies.”

“I understand he’s very good,” I said.

“Wonderful sense of humour, really wonderful.”

Erika Gard’s face twitched with contempt. She looked at me. “Arthur says you will be here for the convention, Mr. Summers.”

“Yes, I think it sounds very interesting.”

That had been a bad choice of words. “It’s not the object of this convention to be merely *interesting*, Mr. Summers.”

I felt an impulse from somewhere back in my childhood to go stand in a corner. Newman, with a nervous display of teeth, said, “Now, Erika, remember that we have to interest our TV audience or they’re going to turn their sets off.”

“More fools they,” Erika Gard said and set her lips. Newman looked relieved, as though he had stuck his neck out and it hadn’t been snapped off.

He cleared his throat. “Honey of a dress, Laura. I’ve always thought that blue was your colour.”

“Thank you!” Laura smiled up at me and patted my arm possessively.

The waitress arrived, and we ordered. Erika Gard said to her in the clipped voice that made every word like a small stone, “I’m not used to waiting this long for service.” The waitress, flustered, spilled water from one of the glasses she had brought. Erika Gard’s yellow eyes never left the girl as she mopped at the tablecloth with a napkin, took our orders, and picked up the menus. Before the waitress was out of hearing Miss Gard added, “The cheap painted trulls they have in service nowadays!”

“Isn’t it awful?” Laura said and received a baleful glare. I nudged her foot under the table, and she smiled and patted my arm again.

I said, “I wish I knew more about America Incorporated, Miss Gard. I’d always had the impression it was a sort of

women's service organization, like the Junior League or—"

Erika Gard gave an insulted snort. "Junior League!" she said. Newman offered Laura a cigarette, which she refused. As he lit one himself I caught the sly, covert glance again.

"It's a political organization, then?" I said.

That was wrong too, but not quite as bad. Erika Gard leaned toward me and tapped her glasses sharply on the table top. "We are *not* a political organization in the common sense of the word, Mr. Summers. We do not seek political power of any kind. We are a union of informed citizens. Our chapters are set up as watchdogs in their communities. Their purpose is to ferret out un-American activity wherever it is to be found. We watch and we warn. There is no need for us to do more than that. An informed citizenry then deals with the situation. The feeling of America Incorporated, the idea on which the organization was founded, is that the body best capable of dealing with communism in America is the American people themselves. But a pilot of some kind is needed to point the way. We are that pilot." She tapped the table with her glasses again and leaned back—the end of the lesson.

"Sounds estimable," I said.

"They get people," Laura said. "Communists," she added as Erika Gard's eyes blazed at her.

Erika Gard said slowly, each word hard and sharp, "Sometimes I find you an insufferably disrespectful, undisciplined, and completely unattractive young lady."

She said to me, "And why shouldn't we 'get' Communists, since they are out to 'get' us and our way of life?"

"We have no sympathy with the administration's softness toward the Reds," Newman said. "We face the facts. We are fighting a war, and we give no quarter to Communists or fellow-travellers or party-liners of any kind. Our weapon is publicity, and we use it against our country's enemies." His and Erika Gard's speeches had the same pat, doctrinaire sound—although the words were different—as those of parlour pinks I had listened to in the thirties when I was in college.

I said—and was immediately sorry—"But who decides who are our country's enemies?"

They both looked at me sharply. Newman's magnified eyes narrowed. Erika Gard leaned toward me and tapped her glasses on the table once more. "*They* decided, Mr. Summers," she said softly.

I nodded as though that had answered my question. The waitress came with a tray. She put a wooden bowl of tuna salad down before Erika Gard, the same before Newman.

"What a foul-looking mess," Erika Gard said loudly.

The waitress ignored her but looked very close to tears. I heard Laura mutter something beneath her breath.

Conversation during lunch was more of the same, but I agreed or nodded at the right places, and Laura seemed subdued since Erika Gard had castigated her. Miss Gard and Newman departed immediately after they had eaten, leaving Laura and me alone. It was as though something violent and oppressive had gone out of the air—as though the barometer had begun to rise at their departure.

"That bitch!" Laura said between her teeth. "That—that fascist bitch! Steve, you leave the girl a great big tip."

4

When Laura and I got back to the house Dick's MG was parked in the courtyard with the Lincoln and Laura's Oldsmobile. Dick was lounging in a chair in the living room, reading a book. He got up as we came in, and stretched.

"What the hell's George think he's doing?" he whispered. He jerked his thumb toward the windows. "He's sitting out there on the corner of the balcony, quiet as hell."

"On watch," I said, and motioned Dick over toward the dining room, out of earshot of the windows. He brought a paper package with him.

"I got your stuff okay," he said, opening the package. "Is this the kind of file you wanted?"

It was, and there were two brass key blanks and a fine

magnifying glass. "Fine," I said.

"Is anybody going to tell me what this is all about?" Laura asked.

"Uh-uh," Dick said, grinning. "Because I don't know, and he won't say."

"I'd like to borrow that camera," I said to Laura. "And if you'd bring me a paper bag it would fit into, and some scissors and scotch tape."

Laura went to get them. I said to Dick, "Does Mr. Black take a walk along the beach every afternoon?"

"I think just about," Dick said. "I've seen him about every time I've been down there late. You going to try to get a picture of him?"

"I'm going to try. I'll need your help, if you'll meet me down at the pier late."

He nodded vigorously.

Laura returned with the camera and a roll of film. The camera was a Waerts Candex, with a good-sized view-finder you looked down into, and a push-button shutter-release on a cord. It couldn't have been better for my purposes. I loaded the camera, put it in one of the paper bags she'd brought, cut a long oblong hole for the lens and the view-finder lens, and taped the bag to the camera. I cut another little hole for the shutter-release cord. I could turn the film by reaching into the bag.

Holding the bag in front of me and peering down, I could see into the view-finder just fine. "Look innocent enough?" I asked.

"Especially if you hold your hand over the lens," Laura said.

"If I get some shots, where can I get the film developed right away?"

"I know the guy that develops them for the drugstore," Dick said. "He lives down in Crown Bay."

I took the camera and Dick's purchases out to my car. In the glove compartment was my flashlight, and I took it and a roll of mechanic's tape out, tore off four strips of tape, and stuck them to the flashlight lens so that there was only

a small square of clear glass for the light to come through. Now I was equipped for a couple of projects I didn't look forward to; the only other equipment I needed was a large quantity of luck.

I found Dick and Laura still in the dining room with their heads together. I said, "I'm going to borrow those swimming trunks I used this morning and spend the rest of the afternoon at the beach. Dick, you be sure and come down in plenty of time."

"I'll be down surfing anyway," Dick said. When I started for my room to change my clothes he called after me, "Go, man, go!"

As I drove down the hill away from the house, in the rear-view mirror I could see Roney still at his post, watching the guest house. I hoped they were only a little suspicious of me, and not worried enough to forbid Black his daily exercise.

There were quite a few sunbathers on the beach near the pier, as well as a lifeguard on his stand, with a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck, and a few hardy souls in the water. Two surfers sat on their boards out beyond the pier, and on the end of the pier sat my fat fisherman, hunched over, holding his pole, as though he hadn't moved since the last time I had been him there.

Wearing Richard Emlyn Mason's swimming trunks and a T shirt, I walked out on the pier. The fisherman had no fish in his gunnysack. He turned his fat, dark face toward me.

"Are you O'Donnell?" I asked.

He nodded, and I said, "My name's Summers. Laura Mason said you might be able to tell me some things I need to know about Billy Farrell."

O'Donnell touched the puckered mole on his cheek with the back of a thick hand and looked reflective.

"I'm afraid I was being a little cagey the last time I talked to you," I said. "I was a friend of Billy's too. He crewed for me on my boat three years ago."

"What do you want to know, mister?"

"I'm not satisfied that he died^{*} the way he's supposed to

have died," I said. "I wanted to tell you that first so you'll understand some of the things I'm going to ask. And I'm going to have to ask you not to repeat just yet that there are any suspicions about what happened."

O'Donnell looked frightened. He stuck out his thick lower lip and nodded slowly. "Go ahead."

"You said Farrell told you it cost five hundred dollars a month to keep that little girl in the hospital. It's obvious that between them Billy and Mary didn't have that kind of money to spend. I've seen his boat and I've seen the engine in it. Was he running in opium from Mexico?"

Looking at his line, still hunched over, O'Donnell was silent for a long time before he said, "Marijuana."

"Do you know who he sold it to?"

"Took it up into LA. I don't know where."

I leaned on the rail beside him, staring down toward the Coronado Islands. O'Donnell spat and said, "But he quit about a month ago."

"How do you know?"

"He told me." The combers flashed in along the pier. The surfers were coasting in and off to the south on the blue curved shoulder of a wave. O'Donnell said, "He asked me once to throw in with him, running that stuff. He said he got pretty scared making the trip alone—not scared of the Coast Guard; he figured he could get by them easy enough in the dark. But he just got lonely and scared out there, Billy said. That's when he told me what he was doing."

"I gave him hell," he went on angrily. "I mean, I'd known Billy and liked him a long time, and I'd never thought of him doing anything like that. I gave him hell. I was mad. He said how it was the only way he could afford to keep his girl in that place up in Oakland. I said what about all the other people's kids, what was he doing to them? What about the other people's kids, getting pushed on to that stuff and then probably going on to all the other things and ending up I don't even like to think about it? I was mad."

He twitched his line a couple of times, then stood up to reel in a mess of seaweed. Patiently he unsnarled his hook

from the amber strands.

"Just about a month ago he told me he'd quit it," he said. "I was glad to hear it—glad he'd quit before he got caught, too. I liked Billy."

"Was that about the time he went to work for Quaintance?"

"Quaintance—oh, he's the blonde fella Miss Mason was asking about. It was around then. Billy didn't go to work for him that I know of, but he took the blonde fella out after yellowtail, and I saw that big automobile at Billy's once or twice. Billy didn't ever say anything to me about working for him, though."

He threw the last of the seaweed off the side of the pier and cast. It was a sweeping, effortless movement, but the line seemed to float out endlessly. O'Donnell sat down again.

He scowled and rubbed at the mole on his cheek again. "Billy said he'd quit running the stuff, and I don't believe he would've told me that if it wasn't so."

"But he still had to pay the hospital bills," I said.

"You think Billy was getting money from this Quaintance for something else crooked, and—" He stopped there. I saw the muscles of his jaw bulge. "I don't like this," he said in a scared voice. "Maybe I'd better go down to Crown Bay and tell the deputy about this."

"Not yet," I said. "I'm going to have a lot of things to tell him soon, but your information might be premature."

"I don't know you," he said and cleared his throat. "I don't know—it looks to me like it might be my duty to tell the deputy that about Billy. I don't know—"

"I guess all I can do is ask you to trust me for a couple of days."

He stood up and worked his pole back and forth. "Well, I guess—since you're a friend of Miss Mason's. I guess I can do that."

We talked a little longer, but he had no more information that seemed important, and after a while I turned to see Dick's MG in the area behind the lifeguard stand. Dick was already on the beach, looking up at me. I went back

along the pier and down the wooden steps to the beach. Dick had leaned his surfboard against one of the piles in the shadow of the pier. "All set?" he whispered.

"We have to rehearse a little first. But I want to wait until there aren't so many people around."

"It'll be a couple of hours yet before he shows up. Everybody ought to be gone by then. I guess I'll go out and catch some waves for a while."

I watched him launch his board, and, on his knees, paddle briskly out through the surf. Then I took off my T shirt and started out into the water myself. The water was very cold. I swam out along the pier, diving under the great fronts of surf. The waves were breaking against the pilings at the end of the pier, below where O'Donnell sat. Off to my left, paddling with long sweeps of his arms, Dick caught a wave, stood up, and went sailing in toward the beach.

I watched the waves piling and slashing against the green mossed piles and saw the ugly growths of mussels clustered on the posts, beneath the surface of the water, and, as I felt the strong, steady pull of the current in toward the pier, thought of Billy's body, battered against those piles and slashed by the sharp shells. I swam on around the pier and in on the other side, to lie in the sun and wonder if Mr. Black were the hold Billy Farrell had had on Quaintance, if Mr. Black were the reason Billy had been murdered—and wonder who Mr. Black was.

When the sun was low over the horizon, the beach almost deserted, I went up to my car to get the camera in its paper bag. The lifeguard was gone, and on the beach was left only a woman, trying to organize her two small children and their gear for departure. O'Donnell was still at his post, but as I came out on the pier again I saw him stand up and reel in. He trudged past me with his pole and gunnysack; he shook his head at me.

"Not much sleep for this old man tonight," he said.

Dick had come in with his board. He leaned it against the cliff near the wooden stairs and came up on the pier to join me.

"Which way is he apt to come from?" I asked.

Dick jerked his thumb to the south.

"If he takes a long walk he must keep pretty close to the water's edge," I said, "so he doesn't have to go through the soft sand. How about going down there to let me draw a bead on you?"

Dick ran back along the pier and down the stairs again. He took up a post on the damp, hard sand ten yards south of the pier. I set the camera on the railing and adjusted its slant with splinters pushed under it until I had Dick centred in the viewfinder. I had him mark a large X in the sand where he stood. He ran back up on the pier again.

"I'll snap the first picture when he gets to that X," I said. "Then, as soon as he's under the pier, I'll grab up the bag and try to get a focus on him when he comes out on the north side of the pier. Your post is down there almost to the lifeguard stand. When he's about the same distance away from the pier as you on the other side, call to him. He'll turn, and you wave—or stick out your tongue, or whatever you like—and I'll try to get a second picture. Got it?"

"Got it." He backed up toward the lifeguard stand. "About here?"

"Fine."

He leaned on the railing, and I heard him practising in a low voice. "Mr. Black! Hey, Mr. Black! Taking your constitutional, Mr. Black?"

There was nothing to do now but wait. I watched the sun sliding toward the horizon and worried about the light. I stared down the beach until my eyes ached. Then I saw the small figure in the distance and heard Dick whisper, "Here he comes." Dick leaped over to the north side of the pier and draped himself over the rail.

There was still plenty of light. I checked the view-finder of the camera to make sure that it was focused on the X in the sand. Holding the shutter release, I leaned on the railing and tried to appear detached from the bag. The figure far down the beach was slowly enlarging.

Mr. Black wore the same outfit—grey trousers and white shirt—in which I had seen him two days before. Today he carried no stick. I could see his face now, but he was no one I had ever seen before. He glanced up at me, then looked straight ahead again. Three steps more, and he stepped on to the X in the sand. I squeezed the shutter-release, waited a moment until he was out of sight beneath the pier, then snatched up the bag, reached inside, and furiously turned the film, moving across to the north side of the pier as I did so.

"Hey!" Dick yelled, so loudly that for a moment I thought it was a warning to me. In the view-finder I watched Mr. Black swing around. "Having a nice walk, Mr. Black?" Dick yelled shrilly, and I snapped the picture, dropped the bag into the crook of my arm, and sauntered slowly along toward the end of the pier, feeling very obvious and very foolish. When I chanced looking at Black again he was marching on northward. I moved out to the end of the pier and back; Black was a tiny, diminishing figure now.

Dick raised a circled thumb and forefinger, grinning triumphantly. "Dig that crazy photographer!" he said. "Hey, easy!"

"Did he notice me on the second picture?"

"Nah! He just gave me a beady eye and went his way. Easy!"

"Let's get down to your friend's place."

We went in the MG at a very fast clip. Dick's friend was a pimply, studious-looking boy. He took the film with him into his darkroom while we waited in a shabby living room. The prints were better than I had hoped. In the first one I had snapped the shutter a little too soon, and Black was just coming into the frame, but his face was there—almost full face and very clear. The second shot was not so clear, but I had caught the profile perfectly as Black looked back and up at Dick. I asked for enlargements of both heads—only the heads—and Dick's friend retired again.

When he returned I had front and side views, like prison

photographs. The front view was of an ordinary enough face, but the profile, although more blurred, was striking. It showed fiercely aristocratic features, a face such as Shakespeare's King John might have had—intelligent, proud, but petty and cruel. I got Dick's friend to paste the two enlargements on a piece of art paper, and he produced an envelope large enough to hold the paper.

It was dark when Dick and I drove back to Helios Beach, and the wind rushing over the windshield of the little car was very cold. Dick drove north at the same rapid clip, his elbow clamped over the top of the door. "Do you feel up to running another errand for me?" I asked. "I want these photographs taken up to San Francisco fast."

"San Francisco! Well—okay."

"You can take the plane from San Diego and—"

"I know how to get there. I go to school up there. Right now?"

"Right now. You'll be met at the airport in San Francisco by a man named Philip Brainerd, or someone who's come from him. If you turn right around and fly back you might be back by morning."

"Easy," Dick said. I saw that he was shivering. "Sure, I'll be glad to do it, Mr. Summers."

"Steve," I said.

"Steve," Dick said. In the passing lane, the MG barrelled into Helios Beach. Dick made a fast turn to the right, up the hill toward the great grey house. In the headlights I saw that Roney was no longer at his post on the balcony. There were no cars in the courtyard, and Rawles said that Mr. Quaintance wasn't back yet, Mrs. Mason had gone to the hotel, he didn't know where Miss Laura had gone. In my room I changed my clothes hurriedly. I wrote Phil Brainerd's name and address on the big envelope, and, down in the corner with a circle around it, the telephone number of the San Francisco office of the FBI.

Dick was already in the living room, wearing a brown tweed suit and a striped tie, and looking mature and very serious. He carried a leather briefcase, into which he put

the envelope containing the photographs of Mr. Black, and nodded solemnly as I briefed him again.

"Listen," he said, "if you see Edie tell her I went down to San Diego to see somebody. Tell her I said if I was going to be late I'd spend the night."

"I'll ride down to the hotel with you," I said.

He let me off at the hotel, we shook hands, and then the little MG roared away down the highway toward San Diego, its tail-lights quickly indistinguishable among the other tail-lights.

I entered the hotel lobby, got some change from the man at the desk, and went into a phone booth, where I put through another call to San Francisco. Again I was lucky and caught Phil Brainerd at home. The quarters dropping into the phone sounded like a bell tolling.

"Still in Helios Beach?" Phil said.

I said, "Listen, I'm sending a messenger up there with two photographs of a man here who's going under the name of Black. I hope you'll be able to identify him. Richard Mason is bringing them on the plane; he's just left here for the airport in San Diego. Will you meet him or have someone meet him up there? I'll call you about noon tomorrow to see if you've made an identification."

"All right, Steve," Phil said. "Will do. Anything exciting going on down there?"

"I think so," I said.

5

The first person I saw when I entered the bar was Edith Mason. She was alone, sitting where she'd been sitting the first time I'd seen her, wearing a beige pleated skirt and a brown cashmere sweater. Her dark hair hung down over her shoulders, parting over the nape of her neck as she leaned forward. From behind she looked like a girl of Laura's age. Farther down the bar I saw Newman and Laura; he had hold of her arm, and they were joining Erika Gard in a

booth. Laura looked toward me, but I disregarded her and sat down beside Edie. In the last booth a young couple sat with their heads together, drinking through two straws from a huge glass in which gardenias floated. A man in a business suit sat at the bar with a Pilsener glass in front of him, staring up at one of the grotesque masks thoughtfully.

I delivered Dick's message, and Edie digested the information without comment or apparent interest. She wore pancake makeup, which she had not applied very evenly. "How's your headache?" I asked.

"It's much better, thank you."

"Mr. Quaintance isn't back from his trip yet?"

"I expect him any minute. He always calls if he isn't going to be back in time for dinner." She looked at her watch, bringing it up close to her eyes; the inevitable martini stood before her. "Very soon now," she said with a hushed weariness in her voice. She reached for her martini.

I hoped I read her mood correctly. If not it probably didn't matter much, as when Quaintance returned I would at least be ostracized anyway. I said, "I don't think much of your America Incorporated, and I don't think you do either."

She didn't move, didn't look at me.

"It must take a lot of martinis to get the taste out of your mouth," I said.

I saw her eyes close for a moment. "Haven't you ever been in love?" she whispered. "Unreasonably? Stupidly? Criminally?"

"I have. With my ex-wife, whom I hope to God I never see again."

"What would you have me do?"

"What you already know you should do."

"I can't," she said pitifully and finished her martini. She stared down into the empty glass

"Summers!" said a sharp, imperious voice, and Edith Mason started as though she had been stabbed in the back.

I swung around on my stool to face Quaintance. His eyes were clouded with anger and something else that might

have been fright; his mouth was drawn down; his hands were in his coat pockets. I hadn't realized how slight he was.

"I know who you are, Summers," he said. "You're a hired spy. I don't like spies. You're to get out, out of this town, and stay out. I don't want to see your ugly spying face around here any more. Out!"

"Why are you so afraid of spies?" I asked, and he snarled wordlessly back at me.

He hadn't looked at Edith Mason, and she had not turned. She was holding her empty glass out to the bartender. Out of the corners of my eyes I saw Laura, Newman, and Erika Gard watching from their booth.

"Out, Summers," Quaintance said, and I saw his shoulder twitch back threateningly. I slid off the stool. But he changed his mind.

"What do you do when people don't scare?" I asked and watched for the shoulder to twitch back again. It didn't. Something in his eyes flickered, his mouth turned farther down; his nose was as sharp and finely drawn as the edge of a knife. Abruptly he swung on his heel and walked out. I saw Laura's smile of contempt and triumph, the bartender's grin. Newman wasn't looking at me any more. Erika Gard was staring sternly at the door through which Quaintance had disappeared. I seated myself on the stool next to Edith Mason again.

She was crying, sipping the martini the bartender had brought her. Tears slipped down her cheeks and left ugly tracks in the pancake make-up she had put on to cover the marks of all the martinis, the self-pity, and not so much the self-delusion as the dark hours when it must have slipped away from her.

"I should have done something," she whispered. "Now he'll—he'll—"

"He'll what?"

"Oh, I don't know. But I'd better go. I'd better go find him before—" She took a drink. The tears crept muddily down her face.

"Are you so afraid of him?"

"Of losing him. I—" She shook her head wildly. "You can't understand. No one can understand." She swung toward me, her eyes blank and confused. "What does he mean, you're a spy?"

"He means he doesn't like me. Haven't you been in America Incorporated long enough to know what they mean when they call someone a spy? Or a Communist?"

A voice said, "Get off that stool, you—" As I started to turn, pain exploded, red and flashing, against the side of my jaw. I staggered off the stool. I almost fell. I gripped the round leather seat with both hands to keep from falling, seeing Quaintance dancing in toward me. He swung almost daintily, but he swung from his knees. I tried to raise a hand to ward off the blow, but again there was the explosion in my cheek and jaw, and I was swung around against the stool on which Edie was sitting, and everything was turning grey and dim. But I held on and managed to get my balance. When Quaintance danced toward me again I had my hands up, and he danced back. I took a step after him. I shook my head to clear it and tried to get that fine, thin nose of Quaintance's into focus in my eyes. I was going to flatten it.

Then I saw George Roney.

He was standing just inside the door to the lobby, huge in the loud, checked sports coat. "Leave the little guy alone. Doc," he said. "Pick somebody your own size."

I slowly turned to face him and hoped the fat around his jowls was meaningful. I could taste the salt of blood in my mouth. Quaintance had retreated, and Edith Mason backed off her stool to stand in the corner with her hands rising to her face and her mouth open like a mask of tragedy. The grey cleared out of my head. Now I felt the coolness of complete rage. Roney wore the sly grin; he ducked his chin into his shoulder, raised his fists. They looked like coconuts.

His left fist jabbed out toward me experimentally, and I knocked it away with my right hand. I had to move around with my back to Quaintance, which worried me.

Having slapped Roney's left away, I dropped my elbows to catch the right that should follow it. The right didn't come; Roney must not be completely sure of himself. But I backed away. He came after me, grinning again. As the left flashed out once more, I ducked and feinted a counter-punch. He moved back, and as he did I trod down hard on his left instep and held his foot down. I drop-kicked against the toe of his right foot.

His weight was off it; his right leg flew back and up. His body was twisted off balance, and he flapped his arms and cursed. Quickly I moved my right foot, hooked it around his left ankle, and jerked as hard as I could. He went over spectacularly and smacked his head on the iron base of the end stool with a nasty sound. He groaned once, kicked once, and then just lay there.

Every once in a while a trick works exactly the way it's supposed to. I turned slowly to face Quaintance.

His fists were held up uncertainly. He was very frightened, but I supposed he couldn't stand to lose face by cutting and running. That was just fine. I was going to attend to that handsome face. At the far end of the bar the young couple had risen and were staring. The man in the business suit was watching idly, as though this were part of the floor show. Newman had come out of his booth.

My voice sounded very thick. "I don't like being hit when I'm not looking," I said. "I hardly ever stand for it." I took a step toward Quaintance. "You made an awful mistake," I said.

"No!" I heard Edith Mason cry. She flashed past me and swung around, shielding Quaintance behind her. "No!"

I said, "Come out from behind her!"

"No!" she cried again. Quaintance didn't move.

"Are you coming?" I asked. I was almost mad enough to go through Edie to get him. Quaintance let her thrust him back. "How about you?" I said to Newman.

But Newman didn't appear to hear. It is pleasant sometimes to know that a lot of people are scared silly of you, but I wasn't feeling pleasant now. I was feeling something

of what Dick must have felt when he let the air out of Quaintance's tyre. I had been slugged from behind, and my cheek and jaw ached, and it didn't look as though I was going to get any satisfaction beyond the lucky piece of footwork that had disposed of Roney. The bartender was leaning on the bar, frowning. I supposed he was worried that Edith Mason—who had class, buddy—was going to get hurt in a scuffle.

I stood there, stalemated. Edie's dark eyes pleaded with me. Quaintance wouldn't look at me. Newman was acting as though he had only stood up to stretch or maybe work a cramp out of his leg. Erika Gard wore a severe, censorious expression. Laura thought I had acted exactly as her father would have and was staring at me with love and hero-worship naked on her face.

I said, "Sit down, Newman."

He sat down.

I stepped forward. Edith Mason retreated, and Quaintance retreated behind her. He still had his fists up, as though he were trying to convince someone that he might use them yet. "Sit down," I said.

He sat down in the booth next to Newman. I jerked my head at Edie, and she sat down opposite him, beside Laura, who had to slide closer to Erika Gard. I looked at the man in the business suit and the young couple at the far end of the bar. "Better beat it," I said. "I'm looking for a fight, and right now I don't much care who it is." The young couple left hurriedly. The man in the business suit drained his beer, nodded at me, and left too.

I leaned on the top of the booth, behind Quaintance, looking from Erika Gard to Newman to Edie, to the back of Quaintance's head. The expression on Laura's face embarrassed me.

I said, "We'll now have some things out in the open, since Quaintance has just found out that I'm a detective. I'm interested in the death of a friend of mine who was pushed off the pier here on May twenty-first. I intend to clip the person who did it."

I paused and looked from face to face again. To see me, Quaintance had to twist his head around and peer at me over his shoulder. The whites of his eyes showed.

"I can spit on the murderer from here," I went on. "But I still have to work out whether he was working for America Incorporated at the time or not. I—"

"Remember what he says," Erika Gard cried. "Just remember the accusations he's making so—"

"Shut up," I said.

Quaintance said in a stifled voice, "Do you know what's going to happen to you?"

I heard the bartender clear his throat, and I swung around. Roney had got up. He stood there swaying. He looked down at me without interest. He went on out of the bar. I turned back to America Incorporated again. They looked restless.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," I said. I leaned on their table. My jaw ached and the rage returned in a wave and beat in my head, along with the throbbing of my jaw. "You are a nauseating bunch of people," I said. "Americans. If you can call yourselves Americans I can call myself—" I couldn't think of anything I could call myself. "Heaven help this country if we have to choose between you and the Communists."

Erika Gard was looking contemptuous, and I slapped my hand down on the table in front of her. She flinched back. "Recently I took exception to someone who called you fascists," I said. "I owe an apology." I slapped my hand down in front of Quaintance in case he was feeling like looking contemptuous. I said, "Canker Sores Incorporated. What a crew you are! A cheap political grafter, a dangerous psychiatric case, a male prostitute—and I mean prostitute in every known sense of the word—"

Quaintance made a shrill sound and started to get up. I put my hand on his shoulder and slammed him down again.

"You *bully!*" Edith Mason cried

"Don't call me names. I haven't finished with you yet. Let me add to the list one gin-soaked hulk with her morals and conscience pickled in alcohol like a lot of worms in

a jar.

"You make me sick," I said, taking a deep breath. "And just now you've made me mad. This isn't your country. You don't get away with killing whoever gets in your way or seems troublesome. You don't get away with running people out of town or giving beatings to people who don't obey your orders." I slammed my hand down again, this time in front of Newman, so he wouldn't think I didn't know he was there. "Your whole philosophy is based on a big mistake," I went on. "You don't think the crummy little individual is important. But you're going to find to your sorrow that a crummy little bum named Billy Farrell was and still is as important as hell. And I'm important as hell, as you're going to find out at the same time. You don't go around killing the Billy Farrells of this country when they get in your way, because someone like me is going to get in your way for doing it, and your great big cancer of an organization is going to trip and fall right on its storm-trooper face."

I straightened up. The bartender was standing at the far end of the bar. There was a pleased expression on his face, as though this were a fairly entertaining show, although not really four-star. I said to the people at the table, "Any questions?"

There weren't any questions.

"Then get the hell out of this bar," I said. "I've been doing a lot of talking, and now I'm going to have a drink for my dry throat, and I'm tired of looking at you." I moved back and rested a hip on a bar stool. I jerked a thumb at Quaintance. He looked insane with hatred; he looked as though he were going to cry. He moved out of the booth, followed by Edith Mason and Newman. When Laura caught my eye I nodded my head toward the door, and she went along too. Erika Gard didn't move.

I watched the others go out. Quaintance had hold of Edie's arm, as though for support, and I could see his fingers digging into the flesh beneath her sweater.

I turned back to Erika Gard. She sat looking at me with

her eagle's eyes; with her grey face, her beaked nose and slitted mouth, she was as grotesquely ugly as the primitive masks on the walls. She was holding a grey purse close against her chest, in long, thin, blue-veined hands.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Summers."

I sat down across from her. "All right," I said. "Talk."

6

Except for the bartender and Erika Gard and me, the bar room was empty. Erika Gard gazed at me with a school-teacherish frown, as though I were a juvenile delinquent held after school for a dressing down. "Mr. Summers," she said in her harsh voice, "I'm going to speak to you frankly."

"Fine!"

"Very frankly," she said. Her old hands looked like claws as they gripped the grey bag. "Mr. Summers, I consider you nothing but a bothersome mosquito in a roomful of people who are trying to accomplish a critically important project."

"Like Farrell?" I said.

She pursed her lips angrily.

"By the critically important project do you mean the America Incorporated convention? Or something a little more long-range than that?"

She looked at me with those remarkable eyes shuttered in her grey, granitic face. She said, "I gather that you are politically a very naïve man, Mr. Summers. You have made some statements that might have been insulting had they not been so exceedingly stupid. I grant you had some provocation for your fit of childish rage. Russell is impulsive and over-violent and of course will be reprimanded. He—"

"Well, I'm certainly glad he's going to be reprimanded." I touched my jaw. But I was beginning to realize that I had talked far too much, and I was more and more unhappy about what Erika Gard had called my fit of childish rage.

"But I don't intend to discuss Russell Quaintance," Erika

Gard went on. "I am concerned with you, Mr. Summers. You employed the word 'fascist' just now. We are used to that word. It has been applied to us by many Communists and their sympathizers. Nevertheless, I do not like to hear it. It is a meaningless word of out-of-date opprobrium, and it is a political word describing a political system. As I think I've told you, we are not political, we have no political aspirations whatsoever. Therefore—"

I leaned forward and grinned at her and said, "You lie. Or else you are incredibly stupid. The rank and file of America Incorporated may not have any political aspirations. But the people who run it have. Do you really think they haven't?" I stared into her face. "No, you're not stupid," I said, and watched the yellow eyes open wide, and saw the madness there. I leaned back again.

"Your methods are not original," I said. "Frighten the people into a state where you can convince them that you are the only group capable of dealing with the Enemy. Raise yourself to power by hate and fear; entrench yourself there by fear and violence. Now you're exploiting our fear of Communists to try to trick us into the same kind of—"

She tapped her pince-nez on the table as though she were rapping for order. She said with vast scorn, "And I suppose you will say next, as your kind always does, that there is no Communist threat to this country, that we can continue carelessly to allow—"

"No. You work that trick so cleverly with anyone trying to retain his sanity, don't you? Either I agree with you or I am driven to the other side—and then exposed as a fellow traveller. No, I know perfectly well that there is a Communist threat, from the outside and the inside. But since the people are aware of it I think you constitute a greater threat. Because they are not yet aware of what you are."

"You fool!" she whispered violently. "All right, Mr. Summers, I see we are going to get nowhere on this level. Let us descend to yours." She sat up stiffly. "I said I would speak frankly. I am responsible for the success of this convention. I consider it one of the greatest responsibilities of

my life, and my life has been one of responsibility and service, as you may know. I am worried about your wild threats; they are made when I am in a difficult position. I am not concerned in any way about this Farrell—”

“You will be.”

Again she tapped the table with her glasses. “It does not interest me whether he was murdered or not, and the ridiculous charge that someone in this group is guilty I will not even stoop to discuss. I am, however, concerned about the convention. You and your stumbling about and reckless statements constitute a threat to its success.”

“They certainly do.”

Her lips tightened into the school-teacherish censure again. She said, “I’m prepared to pay you the sum of one thousand dollars to leave this place and forget this Farrell—indeed, to embark upon your dirty little fishing boat and leave this area completely.”

“Cigarette money,” I said. “Quaintance can touch Mrs. Mason for more than that.”

She sat with her eyes closed and her hands clutching her bag, evidently struggling for control of herself. I wondered what sort of little gun she had in the bag.

“I’m interested in the way your mind works,” I said. “When a problem arises you immediately fall into considerations of blackmail: bribes, extortion, or—at this moment, I imagine—violence. I would certainly be stupid to accept a miserly little thousand dollars and be in a position of blackmailing you—to be murdered like Farrell at the first opportunity. Though there’s a certain consistency there—blackmail, then murder, more blackmail, another murder necessitated, then—”

“Mr. Summers!” she hissed. “One day you may regret some of the things you have said to me tonight.”

“You mean the New Order will get me when it comes to power? Or the bully boys now?”

“Five thousand dollars, Mr. Summers,” she said abruptly. I shook my head, grinning.

“That is my last offer,” Erika Gard said tightly. “If you

do not accept it I will take other steps. If necessary, we will not shrink from that: I advise you to reconsider. I am a woman, Mr. Summers, but I am a determined woman and I love my country. I will not stand idly by and watch it sold down the river to Communism, and I consider one man's life as nothing, set against that of America. Do you understand me?"

"Clearly."

I sat silently watching her. She was quite insane, but it would not do to pass her off as a crackpot. I should not underestimate her, or overestimate the cards I held. Mostly they were very low. It was pretty to consider myself Jack the Giant-killer, taking on America Incorporated and destroying it singlehanded, but it was not very realistic. At best I might inflict a little wound of adverse publicity that would soon heal over. I reminded myself that I was here to find Billy Farrell's murderer, not to take on America Incorporated. Yet now that seemed a cowardly rationalization.

As though she had been reading my thoughts, Erika Gard said, "Mr. Summers, what do you want?"

"A murderer. I dislike murderers. I dislike especially high-handed murderers such as Quaintance. I want him executed." I hesitated for a long time; then I said, "I think he was only acting for your organization, but maybe I'll make you an offer. I might accept as the murderer only the man who did the job."

"This is ridiculous, Mr. Summers," she said. "I feel silly even bothering to deny that we were involved with Farrell in any way. I have no idea who—as you put it—did the job. I really don't even believe that this man was murdered at all. Am I to understand that he was a friend of yours?"

"He was. Now he's getting to be a symbol."

"I'm told he has a crippled daughter who must be cared for. Five thousand dollars should go a long way toward helping this child, should it not?"

"Not very far," I said.

"Ten thousand dollars," Erika Gard said. Her grey face darkened, and she looked for a moment as though she were

having an attack of some kind. "Ten thousand dollars," she whispered, and I realized with a shock how far ten thousand dollars would go toward caring for the crippled girl.

And what else, after all, did I think I was working for? The ridiculous hope of damaging America Incorporated, which, as did Laura, I now hated and feared? Getting Quaintance? Justice rendered, Mirrilees was still deprived of her father and of the pleasant hospital with the special equipment for children with cerebral palsy, and the nice, specially trained nurses to care for her.

"Think about it, Mr. Summers," Erika Gard said. Gripping her purse against her side, she slid out of the booth. I listened to her brisk footsteps fading away as she marched out of the bar.

7

I went over and sat at the bar. The bartender brought me a highball and gave me a contemplative look. "Big night," he commented. He was a sandy-haired, blunt-featured man with pale blue eyes. The highball he had brought was a strong one. When I put out some change he shook his head.

"On the house. You handled the big boy real nice, mister."

He brought a half-full glass out from under the bar, took a drink, glanced toward the door, then squinted at me. "I couldn't help hearing a little when you were sounding off to the whole crew there. You some kind of a cop?"

"No. A friend of Farrell's."

He nodded. "Billy was in here the night he went off the pier, you know."

"I'd heard he was."

"Pretty tight. He hit liquor hard. He had something on Blondie, didn't he?"

I busied myself lighting my pipe to avoid answering.

"Blondie took it from him, is why I think Billy had something on him," the bartender said, leaning his elbows on the bar in front of me. "Billy was down at the end of the bar

there when Blondie came in with Mrs. Mason, and he yelled some joke and laughed like he was going to split."

"What joke, do you remember?"

He frowned reflectively and rubbed his jaw. "I remember I didn't get it, whatever it was." He shook his head. "Forget. Anyway, Blondie came down and shut him up, nice as you please. Billy shut up for a while, but then he started being obnoxious again. He kept laughing that nasty laugh—remember that mean laugh of his? He was thinking he was real smart that night. I wonder if he still thought he was smart when he hit the water." He scooped up his glass for another drink. His pale eyes gazed steadily into mine.

"I never even thought about it being homicide until I heard you mention it," he went on. "Like those riddles you used to hear when you were kids. You know? When you hear the answer it's so obvious you want to kick yourself. You figure it was Blondie and his muscle together, or just Blondie?"

"I don't know, but you have it worked out as well as I have with a lot less legwork."

"You see and hear a lot, a place like this. You get to know everybody, and you hear them when they're tight."

"I wish you could remember what Farrell was saying."

"It'll come. I've got my subconscious working on it. You ever do that?"

I said I had, and he nodded. "It'll come," he said. "I wonder what happened when Billy left here, though. He was too drunk to walk home, and he wouldn't drive when he was drunk. When he was drunk he'd get somebody to drive him. I remember one time he called the cab in Crown Bay to take him home, and that cost the kind of money he and his wife didn't have. What he might have done that night is go outside and sit in Blondie's car for Blondie to run him home. And when Blondie went out and found him, maybe he figured he'd had about enough and knocked Billy on the head and took him to the pier and dumped him. It seemed to me Mrs. Mason was here by herself for a while, but I can't remember how long it was or what time or any-

thing. Damn it all to hell, if I'd thought about its maybe being homicide the next day or so, I would've remembered. What do you think?"

I nodded. I was glad I had found the bartender in a receptive frame of mind.

"What do you think Billy had on Blondie?"

"I wish I knew."

"He had something on him all right." He took my empty glass away, refilled it, and brought it back. "It sure gets me that a woman with class like Mrs. Mason hangs around with a bunch of schmucks like that. This America Incorporated—it seems like people down here in Southern California will go for any kind of stupid fake religion or anything else, just so it gets them all worked up and costs them a lot of money and it's got some big smooth flashy crook like this Raile running it. Like some silly animals I read about somewhere—every once in a while they get all excited and just keep running till they run off a cliff or something into the water and drown."

"Lemmings," I said.

The bartender's eyes turned reflective again. Then he grinned. "Wetbacks," he said.

"What?"

"Wetbacks. Billy had some joke about wetbacks that night he kept yelling at Blondie. Wetbacks. Hello, Miss Mason."

Laura sat down next to me. "Just a little straight bourbon with ice, Ernie," she said.

Ernie went to get it. Laura's eyes looked very bright.

"What's been going on?" I asked.

"Well, it was just wonderful—and horrible. Russie called Art Newman a buck-toothed yellow so-and-so as soon as we got into the lobby. And Art said something back, and Russie hit him in the stomach. Art looked like he was going to throw up and had to go upstairs. Edie was crying and calling to Russie to forgive her—I don't know what for—but Russie rushed outside. We went outside too, because Edie was in bad shape and I wanted to take her home, and there

were Russie and George. I guess George had been waiting in Russie's car. He was standing there with the car door open, and Russie was slapping him—neither of them saying a word, while Russie slapped him again and again. It was pretty awful to see.

"Then when I was trying to get Edie into my car it seemed to seep through to her that someone had said you were a private detective, and she began screaming at me—how I had hired you to break up her beautiful love affair with Russie, and how could I be so jealous and mean. And yelling for Russie. He came over then, and she screamed at him that I'd hired you to destroy their great love and all that. He didn't say anything; he just looked at me, and I don't know what he thinks. But I denied everything. Anyway, you're not working for me, are you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh. Anyway, it had all been funny in a terrible sort of way up till then. Then I got a little scared—I think mostly because Russie didn't say anything. He and George went back into the hotel, and I took Edie home. Poor Edie! On the way home I heard about all the terrible things I'd done to her." She drank a long swallow of her whisky and shivered violently. "I think you'd better watch out, Steve," she whispered.

"Yes."

She finished her drink. She turned her set, serious, big-eyed face toward me. "Let's get out of here, shall we?"

We went through the empty lobby and on to the back terrace, where it was very dark. Laura swung around toward me and took hold of both my arms. Her face was a pale patch in the darkness. "I'm in love with you, Steve."

"No," I said.

"Oh, yes. Steve—"

"No you're not," I said. "I just rode my bicycle past you no-hands. You're not in love with me."

"That's what you think." She turned away, and I didn't know what to say now. Finally she said in a small voice, "Aren't you in love with me at all?"

"Laura, I'm not about to let myself fall in love with a twenty-two-year-old girl." Then I said, trying to make a joke of it, "Besides, I'm going to do your job for you, and I want things on a businesslike basis."

She didn't say anything, and I continued. "Erika Gard offered me ten thousand dollars to lay off," I said. "That's going to be my price. For that amount of money I will guarantee to furnish the evidence and motive to convict Quaintance—or at least send him to trial—for the Farrell murder."

I couldn't see her expression in the darkness. She was rubbing a hand up and down her bare arm.

I said, "I have to tell you that if you don't want to finance the job I'll probably go ahead anyway. But the money isn't going to me; it'll be for the support of the Farrells' little girl, who has cerebral palsy. She—"

"All right," Laura said.

"It's on a contingency basis."

"You're sure of yourself."

"Yes," I said. "Now I want you to come along with me on a job." I led her back through the hotel and outside to my car, where I took the key blanks, key file, magnifying glass, and flashlight from the glove compartment.

"What are we going to do?" Laura demanded.

"A little larceny," I said. "You're the lookout."

Quaintance's Cadillac was parked with its nose toward the hotel entrance, so the rear end was protected from view. First I looked inside and under the seats for the lug wrench, but it wasn't there. The boot was locked. I squatted down before the lock and had Laura direct the slim beam from the flashlight on it. I inserted a key blank, twisted it back and forth, brought it out, and in the pencil of light studied the friction marks through the magnifying glass. I filed the scarred points, inserted the key again and twisted it from side to side, studied the new marks, filed again. A good key man can make a key in six or eight tries; it took me what seemed like an hour. But finally the key turned grudgingly, and I opened the boot and took out the chrome

lug wrench. I directed the flashlight up and down its length.

"You may have to testify you saw me take this out of Quaintance's car," I said. "And identify it."

Laura whispered, "Is that what he used to kill—"

"I think so." Holding the lug wrench carefully by the socket, I took it back to my car and locked it in my boot with the length of railing from the pier. Laura's Oldsmobile was parked nearby, but she got in with me.

When I got behind the wheel she said, "And now what?"

"Now you go home, and I go down to San Diego to sleep on my boat."

"You don't have to do that. I have as much to say about who stays with us as Edie does. She's knocked herself out with sleeping pills by now anyway."

"I don't think I want to do any more rounds with Quaintance and Roney tonight. I might not be so lucky again. By the way, Dick's flown to San Francisco on an errand for me. He ought to be back early tomorrow."

"San Francisco," Laura said. "Well, lots of things seem to be happening." She was sitting close to me, with her legs up on the seat beside her and her arms crossed and pressed tightly to her chest. "Lots of things," she said.

I put the key in the ignition and turned it.

"Please," Laura whispered. "Aren't you even going to kiss me?"

I put my arm around her to kiss her, and with a sudden movement she flung herself into my arms. But it was as I had dreaded, known, it would be; she curled up on my lap and pressed her head against my chest. She was like a little girl cuddling safe and warm in Daddy's arms, tired and frightened and insecure after a difficult day. I couldn't see whether she had her thumb in her mouth or not.

I got her off my lap and out of the car as gently as I could. I drove much faster than I should have down to the anchorage in San Diego, where the *Marina* was.

8

At the anchorage I stopped and got out and stretched. The night was dark but clear, and a few stars showed, dim above the multitudinous coloured lights on and around San Diego Bay. A faint breeze smelling of salt and fuel oil and tar came in off the water. A light burned in the little office, where I could see the night watchman dozing over a comic book, and beyond was the dark maze of masts and booms and trawling outriggers.

I had intended to take the piece of railing from the pier and Quaintance's lug wrench aboard, to check the bruises on the wood through the magnifying glass, but I felt too tired, lonely, and depressed. I went down the slightly swaying dock toward the *Marina*. She loomed black against the sky, near the end of the dock, out of the illumination of the docklights.

I swung aboard. As I straddled the rail I saw the five-gallon can on the deck and wondered what it was doing there, and then I sensed more than saw the shape rising in the galley doorway. I saw the swift movement and tried to duck away, but there was a slashing pain over my temple, solid redness of pain in my head, and then a release, and everything gone, and only the sensation of falling.

I came back to consciousness, sweating in the heat, smelling gasoline, hearing a huge crackling and distant shouts. Everything was light. My head throbbed fiercely as I struggled to sit up: I was sitting on the deck. I grasped the familiar rail and pulled myself to my feet and groaned as I leaned there with the pain in my head suddenly like a knife, and almost fell over the rail as I vomited. I heard the shouts more clearly.

"Fire!" I heard myself yell in a hoarse, terrified, completely incredulous voice. I staggered around toward the chartroom, where my .45 was, but the orange-yellow flames were swarming up its sides with a kind of violent and fascinating beauty. I couldn't get in there—nor would there

be anyone to shoot now. The flames leaped up the wheelhouse and caught on the dry, creosoted wood of the outriggers. There was a fire extinguisher inside the galley door, but I might as well shoot at the fire with a water pistol. I put my hand to the side of my head and felt the coagulating blood.

I stood there helplessly with tears running down my cheeks. Behind me someone was yelling more loudly, and I could feel the *Marina* moving. They must have loosed the moorings. They were pushing her out of the slip to save the other boats. I watched the flames pour down into the galley from the chartroom and lick out the galley door in a fat red tongue.

"Jump!" someone was yelling from the dock. "Jump, for God's sake!"

I climbed over the rail and dropped into the water. It was an icy shock, and a moment later there was a vicious pain in my temple as the wound reopened. I pushed myself away from the *Marina* and swam toward the dock, where a crowd of faces peered down at me and many hands reached for my arms and pulled me out of the water.

The *Marina* was almost clear of the slip now. Men on the other side were pushing her with poles. The dock waterhose had been turned on—a ridiculously thin stream, playing on the wheelhouse. A pump started racketing on the boat in the next slip, and another stream of water arched over, but almost immediately the *Marina* was out of its range. Flames climbed higher on the superstructure. She was gone; I knew she was gone.

"We thought we'd better shove her out of the slip," a gentle voice said.

"Yeah," I said. A hand patted my wet back.

"What happened?" someone else asked. "Start in the galley?"

"I smelled gas," another voice said.

"I don't know what happened," I lied.

A flashlight was turned on my face. "Hey, he hit his head. Somebody better send for a doctor."

"I'm all right," I said. I watched my boat float free of the end of the slip, where the tide swung her around until I could see the name on the stern very clearly :

MARINA
Singer's Harbour

The flames made a cheerful crackling-roaring sound, and their reflection in the water was very beautiful. In the channel she was swinging in with the tide, but a dory with two men in it appeared, tied on to her bowline, and one of the men rowing, held her stem toward the bay until the fireboat arrived, the red light flashing around and around, and grappled on and arched fat streams of water into her.

The doctor came, and I went aboard the *Remember Me*, and he put some stitches in my scalp, strung a bandage around my head, and said I'd better have X rays taken. Afterward I went out on the dock again for a last look at the *Marina*. There was nothing left but the hull, which was still burning stubbornly, sitting very low in the water. The fireboat drowned the last of the flames just before the bay itself would have.

I went back aboard the *Remember Me* and had a cup of coffee with the fat skipper.

"Insured?" he asked me as I sat across the galley table from him, shivering in his bathrobe.

"I can't replace her for what she's insured for."

He shook his head. "Don't know what happened, huh?"

"No." I drank from the white mug of hot, bitter coffee.

"Probably never know."

I nodded.

"Tough to lose your boat," the skipper of the *Remember Me* said gently. We sat in his galley drinking coffee until it was light, and then he fried some eggs, and we ate them and drank some more coffee until it was eight o'clock, when I went over to make out the reports the harbourmaster wanted.

three

I

As soon as I could I phoned Phil Brainerd in San Francisco. The photographs had meant nothing to him, but they were being checked. It was a disappointment, and I was not in the mood to accept disappointments philosophically.

It was the middle of the afternoon before I was able to leave San Diego and start up the coast toward Helios Beach. In Crown Bay I stopped at the deputy sheriff's office. I took the length of railing and the lug wrench inside.

Oster got up as I came in. "Oh, hello, Summers." He looked at the bandage on my head. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

"They bumped me on the head last night and burned my boat."

"Who's 'they'?" Oster asked, more quietly still.

"Quaintance and company."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure. But I haven't anything to go on legally. Not about that." I put the lug wrench on his desk and leaned the two-by-four against the wall. "Exhibits One and Two," I said. "Exhibit Three is Farrell's skull, which will have to be exhumed. I'll have Exhibit Four pretty soon." I hoped I would.

"What's all this?" Oster said and sat down. His pink freckled face was flushed.

"That's the missing piece of railing from the pier. Mary Farrell had found it. She's been blackmailing Quaintance."

"Quaintance," Oster said. He lit a cigarette. He looked worried and uneasy.

"Quaintance," I said. "He hammered the railing off the

pier after Farrell was thrown over. You can see the marks. The rail was hammered off with that lug wrench. Farrell was stunned or killed with the lug wrench too. I stole it out of Quaintance's car last night. Have you got a good safe place to keep these items till they're needed?"

Oster scowled down at them. He scowled up at me. "How about a Coke?" he asked.

"All right."

He left the office and in a few minutes came back with two bottles of Coca-Cola. He poured them into paper cups and brought out a pint of whisky from his drawer. "With or without?"

"With."

He laced the Cokes with bourbon, and we had a silent drink together. Oster said, "That was so I could get up the nerve to tell you I haven't got the nerve."

"You don't need to do anything yet. There isn't enough to go to bat with yet. But there's more coming. Mary Farrell is going to have to speak up, but she thinks she's going to get some money out of Quaintance, and she won't talk yet. I'll see her again today. A groceryman named O'Donnell and the bartender at the hotel can tell you things that work in. I'm telling you all this in case they have better luck next time they try to kill me. Farrell had been doing some dirty work for Quaintance—what it was is what I hope to nail down today. Farrell started blackmailing him and also drinking and talking too much. So Quaintance killed him." I related the bartender's theory of the murder. "He knocked him on the head then, or on the way to the pier, threw him over, and hammered that piece of railing off," I said. "Then he went home and, I'm sure, didn't lose any sleep."

Oster took a drink and said, "You understand there's not enough to go on yet, don't you? I don't think I'll even let the sheriff in on this. In case it blows up."

"It's not going to blow up."

"You're pretty sure you're going to get enough to indict him?"

"I know I am."

"Listen, you look kind of white. You sure you're all right?"

"I'm all right," I said. "I'm just so mad I've changed colour. As I said, they burned my boat, and I know damn well I'm never going to get them on that."

"Total loss?"

I nodded.

Oster said haltingly, "I remember my grandfather always used to say, 'Don't ever get mad, or you're already lost the fight.'"

"Most of the time you have to be mad to fight in the first place."

"There's that," Oster said and sighed. "Well, I wish you a lot of luck, Summers. I guess you think I'm pretty chicken. But I'll see the sheriff, and we'll move, if you get enough for us to move on."

I nodded and finished the Coke and bourbon, which tasted sickly sweet and felt heavy in my stomach. "Take good care of Exhibits One and Two," I said and went on out. When I looked back Oster was sitting at his desk with an unlit cigarette in his mouth, staring down at the lug wrench.

I drove on north to Helios Beach. In the bright sun it looked sleepy, calm, and safe. In the window of the post office there was a large poster exhorting me to join the marines and fight. I was going to do my fighting unattached in Helios Beach, which was the front line at the moment.

Quaintance's car was in the same place in the hotel parking lot; probably it had spent the night there. I wondered whose car had been used for the expedition to the anchorage. I parked and went into the lobby and announced to the room clerk that I wanted a room. He hemmed and hawed and apologized—all the rooms were reserved.

"Look," I said. "Miss Laura Mason told your boss I wasn't to have a room here. She has now changed her mind, as you may ascertain by phoning her. If I don't get a room now I'm going to make such a terrible stink that everybody concerned is going to be awfully sorry."

It turned out that he did have a room after all, but I could only have it until tomorrow when the people started coming down for the convention. Then they really were full, he said firmly.

"Fine," I said. "Now call Miss Erika Gard and tell her Mr. Stephen Summers requires to talk to her."

After a short time Erika Gard came down the stairs, wearing a long grey dress. Around her neck was a tight black velvet band, the black cord of her pince-nez, and a long string of glass and shell beads that hung in two loops to her waist. I moved over to the bottom of the stairs to meet her.

She glanced with no particular interest at the bandage on my head. "Good afternoon, Mr. Summers," she said icily. "What have you decided?"

"I think I won't accept your offer."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I also retract the offer I made you. I was out for justice then and was willing to make compromises to get it. Now I'm after revenge as well."

"You have been warned, Mr. Summers."

"Likewise," I said as she turned away. I watched her go back up the stairs. She moved very slowly, very stiff and erect, and she didn't touch the bannister.

2

It was late in the afternoon when I drove into the courtyard before the Mason house. Dick's MG was back, parked between the Lincoln and Laura's car. The thin old butler, Rawles, opened the door and looked upset to see me.

"Mrs. Mason says I'm not to be admitted, and Miss Laura says I am," I said. "Is that it? Well, you'll have to tell Mrs. Mason you couldn't stop me."

I went in past him and down the hall. In the living room Edith Mason had risen from the couch and was looking toward me with a smile which quickly faded. She had thought I was *Russie*.

"Rawles!" she called. "Rawles—"

"You don't really think Rawles could put me out," I said. "Where's Laura?"

"I've warned her about you," Edie said. She looked haggard today. She looked her age despite the make-up and the eye shadow, the youthful sweater and skirt. Her eyes were protuberant and red-rimmed as she peered past me—but Rawles had not appeared in answer to her call. "A Communist spy," she said with what seemed real physical revulsion. "I don't think I've ever really seen a Communist before. I tried to tell her—"

"But she just laughed at you—very properly." I saw her glance at the bandage on my head. "A blunt instrument," I said. "Then they tried to burn me along with my boat."

I saw her lips form the word, "Who?"

"You know who. Or didn't they tell you they were going to kill me?"

"I couldn't ever believe anything you said."

"That's too bad. Because if you'd get your head out of the sand you might not get the awful shock that's coming your way." I started for the door to the patio, where I heard splashing in the pool.

"Wait!" Edith Mason said.

Bent over, her face twisted, for a moment she looked almost witchlike. "I know you're working for Laura," she whispered. "I know Laura hired you to—"

"You can't have it both ways," I said. "Am I a Communist spy or working for Laura? I can't be—"

"I don't know what you are! But you're trying to implicate Russell in the death of that man Farrell, and you can't!" Her hands worked together. "He didn't kill that man. It's impossible. It's ridiculous. It's— But if through some terrible fiendishness you can seem to prove he did, I'll confess to it myself to save him!"

"I don't think so. Because I'll prove it to you too."

"Never!"

"What a mother for some juvenile-delinquent boy you might have made."

She gasped. She took a step forward and swung her hand at me.

I caught her wrist and flung her hand down. "I'm tired of being slugged," I said and watched her turn away. She sobbed—a painful, wrenching sound. I tried not to pity her.

"What a favour I'm doing for you," I said. "What a favour for a lot of people. Putting him away—in the gas chamber, I hope. When he breathes that gas a lot of people—"

Edie whispered, "If that ever happens I'll kill you! In the most awful way. I—"

"No, I don't think you'd be any good at it. It takes a steady hand. I think you'll just soak yourself with martinis and sleep it off with a handful of Nembutal. Besides, I'm a hard man to kill. Russie failed last night, and he's had experience. He may try again, your juvenile-delinquent boy, but I'm going to get him." I was surprised to hear myself using Laura and Dick's word, but it had come to be the proper word.

"I don't believe it," Edie whispered. Mascara had run in black, crooked tracks down her cheeks. "I don't believe he tried to kill you. I—"

"But hadn't you better start getting drunk so you won't have to think about it?" I said, and went on out into the patio.

Dick was on his back in the pool, kicking with his long legs. Laura lay prone on the blue tiles, very tanned, very slim in a yellow suit. The sun was bright and made gold flakes on the ripples in the pool. Out here it seemed another world from the room I had just left, where Edith Mason was probably either weeping or screaming at Rawles to make her a jug of martinis.

Dick waved an arm. "Hi. Hey, what happened?"

Laura sat up quickly, then leaped to her feet. Her bare feet pattered on the tiles as she ran toward me. "Steve, what did they do?"

Dick pulled himself out of the water and came over more slowly. I told them what had happened. Laura clung to my

arm with both hands, staring up into my face, and I could see the muscles pulled tight in little scallops along the edge of her jaw.

"They tried to kill you," she said, and something in her face reminded me of Edie's when she had threatened me. I found grim humour in the thought that Laura would be a considerably more effective avenger than her stepmother.

"They just tried to cook him, was all," Dick said. He laughed with a sharp exhalation of breath. "Dig that crazy planked steak."

"And you think it's so funny?" Laura cried, turning on him savagely.

"Hey!" Dick said and stepped back in mock fright. He looked at me with an eyebrow raised and said, "I guess you know!"

"Shut up," Laura said. "Is your head all right?" she said to me.

"I wouldn't mind sitting down with a drink right now." Laura and I sat down while Dick ran to get me a highball—another rush call for Rawles. I should, I thought, have felt embarrassed alone with Laura. Instead I felt relaxed for the first time since I had become conscious to find the *Marina* soaked in gasoline and burning. It was a curious feeling, like coming home to a big, comfortable, well-used chair and having someone bring me a drink and my pipe and slippers. I reached in my pocket for my pipe, and then remembered and almost laughed at myself. But the feeling of the hate seeping out of me was almost physical. Hate and fear, I thought—those were the stock in trade of the people I hated and feared, the diseases they nursed along and spread and also inspired against themselves. How easy it was to get infected.

"Steve, are you all right?" Laura asked worriedly. "Really?"

"Bloody but unbowed. Sure, I'm old and tough." I managed a decent grin. "My boat's burned behind me," I said, and I could even laugh now.

"I'm afraid," Laura said.

"Don't be afraid for me."

"But I worked so hard to get you into this. If—"

She stopped as Dick came out with a highball in a tall glass. It tasted like almost straight bourbon, the Mason's fine expensive bourbon. He sat down on the sand in front of us, and I asked about his trip.

"Easy," he said. "A guy met me at the airport and took me out to Mr. and Mrs. Brainerd's, and I slept for a couple of hours and had some breakfast before it was time for the plane back. They're real nice. He thinks a lot of you."

"Have you got a gun?" Laura asked suddenly.

"Not any more."

"Where's that job of Dad's?" Dick said. "That one with the special grip and all. It ought to be around somewhere."

"I've got it in my room," Laura said and went to get it.

I drank my drink and felt all the tight nerves and muscles loosening and uncoiling, and I knew what I felt was not just from the whisky in my stomach but from being with Dick and Laura Mason, whom I liked so very much, and who liked me. I watched the door to Laura's room, which was half ajar.

"Laura's kind of gone on you, I guess you know," Dick said in a low voice.

I shook my head, not to deny it, but because I didn't want to think about last night now. But the whisky tasted suddenly sour in my throat, and there was the bitter picture of myself as the falsely heroic-sized figure to the two of them, the man who looked like their father, big and tough, as he knocked out George Roney and went after Quaintance for them.

"Yeah, she is," Dick said. His head bent down, he made marks in the sand with his finger. His ears were very red.

"I'm almost old enough to be her father, Dick."

He didn't say any more, or look up, till Laura returned with the pistol. It was a police .38 set on a hand-carved hardwood stock and butt. In her other hand was a heavy box of cartridges. She handed them to me. Colonel Richard Mason's swimming trunks, his camera, and now his revolver

—the one that had fired the bullet that Laura wore on a chain around her neck on special occasions.

Dick got up and stretched. "Say, I'm going in and take a nap," he said. "I just got back a couple of hours ago, and I'm sleepy as hell. See you later."

"Thanks for doing my legwork, Dick."

"I hope something comes of it." He moved off toward his room.

"I hope you appreciate your brother," I said to Laura. "I can't think of anyone else that age I've liked since I was that age myself." I wondered why that should suddenly seem such a long time past.

"A real Emlyn Mason," Laura said.

We sat in silence in the canvas chairs. I watched the gold spangles of the sun on the blue of the pool. I felt calm now, and I thought of the revenge of which I had spoken to Erika Gard. But Billy Farrell had taken his chances and had lost; for him there was no need of revenge. You could not avenge a boat. You avenged only yourself, which was vanity. No, I was not out after revenge. But the people who said, "I am not concerned with the Farrells of this world," who murdered the Farrells of this world when they were obstructed or worried by them, who burned other people's boats, who thought always in terms of murder or buying off—those people had to be dealt with. They had to be brought to justice and punished, and if that involved "getting" them, then they must be got—Quaintance alone, or the whole organization along with him, as much as possible. I was surprised that I was able to think about it so calmly now. It was like coming out of a fever.

I said, "I had a little set-to with your stepmother when I came in. Does she really think I'm a Communist spy? Does she really swallow that sort of thing?"

"I don't know," Laura said. "She's mentioned it to me—though I thought it was a trick to make me mad, so I'd admit you were just a private detective I'd hired." She was silent for a time. "I've been feeling sorry for her," she said. "It's the first time I think I've ever felt sorry for her. She's

so terrified of being middle-aged. It must be terrible—for her. She must look in the mirror sometimes and see that she's forty-five and there's no way out of it. And she must know that Quaintance is only after big gobs of Mason money. I think she must really love him."

"She'll get over it."

"Oh, like that!" She snapped her fingers. "And she'll be down in the hotel bar or up in Los Angeles at the big parties, picking up another beautiful love affair. But it's kind of tragic. Poor Edie! When you start feeling sorry for someone all your feelings for them change, don't they?"

I nodded.

"Do you want to stay here tonight, Steve?"

"I managed to get a room at the hotel. I think that will be better. Laura, I think I ought to warn you. Quaintance may begin to operate on the assumption that Edie's right about you and me, and try to put the pressure on you to get me off his back—you or Dick."

She started to smile; then I saw her glance at the bandage on my head.

"Do you want to come down to the hotel with me now?" I asked. "I've got to see someone and make a long-distance phone call. But if you don't mind waiting in the bar maybe we could have dinner together."

"I'd like to."

"Go get your clothes on, and let's go down to the hotel."

"I wish you'd said that last a little differently," Laura said, blushed furiously, and hurried off to her room again. I supposed she was making some kind of apology for last night.

When she returned she wore a bright print dress with a low neck, her hair was tied back loosely, and she looked cool, reserved, embarrassed, and very beautiful. I got up and picked up the revolver and the box of cartridges from the table, and put the gun in my coat pocket. Edith Mason was not in the living room, but as I paused to look out the window at the little stone house where Black lived I heard footfalls in the hall.

Quaintance entered.

He stopped just inside the living room, slight, handsome, afraid. Suddenly I wondered what he had sprung from, and what intricate mechanism made him what he was. Laura took hold of my arm as we moved toward him. He stood his ground. His face was stiff and controlled; only his eyes moved, darting from me to Laura to the stairs at his right. I thought of him and Roney boarding the *Marina*—they must have arrived only moments before I did—and sapping me down, dumping gasoline over the deck and setting it afire, maybe watching the fire from somewhere nearby. Or perhaps Quaintance had played it safe and assigned only Roney to the job. But Quaintance would have wanted to see it.

I said, "Burned any good boats lately?" and felt a little pride that I could keep my voice so even as I said it.

Quaintance didn't reply. When he saw I wasn't going to attack him he seemed to regain a little of his bravado, and his mouth twisted scornfully. His eyes seemed to bore through Laura for a moment before he stepped sideways and swung up the stairs.

Neither of us mentioned him as we went out to my car and drove down the hill, but Laura seemed very nervous. I parked my car in the lot, the revolver and the shells in the glove compartment, Laura in the hotel bar, and went into a phone booth to try to get hold of Phil Brainerd again. But no one at the numbers I had knew where he was or when he would be back. The operator said she would try again in twenty minutes.

It was a little after six-thirty by my watch. I drove over to the little house Billy had built but had never quite finished. The old Chevrolet wasn't there, and as I got out the man in the house next door hailed me from the porch.

"She won't be home for about an hour. Thursday night's her night to stay at the PO and sort the late mail. You thinking about buying that boat?"

I told him I was thinking about it and drove back to the hotel. I had a drink with Laura and then phoned my

operator. Still no luck. I went back and had another drink with Laura.

It was dark outside and almost time for me to contact the operator for the third time, when I heard sirens on the highway, faint and distant, and then shrilling loud and winding down to silence not more than a block or two away.

"Another smack-up on the highway," Laura said. "One a day."

But I felt a flash of intuition that made me start to sweat, and my heart beat hard.

I backed off my stool. "Pardon me a minute," I said to Laura. I hurried out through the lobby; outside I began to run. In the street that led down past the hotel toward the pier I saw several others running. I heard another siren whooping it up. A long grey ambulance turned off the highway and passed me, passed Mary Farrell's little old Chevrolet, which was parked across the street from the post office, and turned the corner. I ran around the corner after it; a block to the south was a cluster of people like a dark frieze against a backdrop of car headlights. I ran toward them from the sidewalk, and then down the street, where the sidewalk disintegrated into a rough dirt path.

I shouldered my way into the crowd. Close to the glare of headlights were two stark policemen, and the lights were stark and white on the asphalt and on a pitiful bundle covered by a blanket which did not conceal the blood.

The ambulance attendants lifted the body on to a stretcher and slid the stretcher into the ambulance. "Who is it?" I demanded of the boy standing next to me. But I already knew. I thought I must have known when I had first heard that siren slowing to a stop.

"Mrs. Farrell," the boy said in an awed voice. "Somebody ran into her."

One of the attendants slammed the ambulance door. The siren came on again, and the ambulance moved ahead through the crowd and past the police cars. The two troopers were trying to clear the street. The one nearest me

was the man who had been in Oster's office that first day.

"All right, move along," he said. "There's nothing more to see." Then he recognized me and nodded. "Hello, Summers." The others were moving slowly away, looking back at the blood on the street.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Hit and run." In the illumination of the headlights the trooper's eyes were hard. "She was walking down the street on the wrong side. Somebody hit her from behind and dragged her. All right, move along, kid," he said to the boy.

"It must have marked his car up," he said to me. "A couple of people heard it and saw the car, but he turned his lights off right away and beat it. But we'll catch up with him."

I didn't think they would, and I felt sick—and felt the grim rage returning, and knew that part of it was guilt. This was partly my fault.

"I don't like hit and runs," the trooper said coldly. "It's murder."

"Yes," I said, and wondered why Mary Farrell had been walking when her car was parked across from the post office. I thought I knew.

"Did anybody have an idea what kind of car it was?" I asked the trooper.

"One of them said it was a little car—coupe or convertible." He moved on, shooing the people away from the sight of blood. I walked back to where the old Chevrolet was parked, got in, and fumbled around behind the ignition switch. I felt the wire hanging down. Someone had pulled it loose so Mary Farrell's car wouldn't start, so Mary Farrell would have to walk home alone down the dark street. Then he had watched her from the little coupe or convertible that had probably been stolen expressly for this, until she passed around the corner, going toward her lonely house four blocks away; waited a little longer; then started around the corner after her . . .

I crossed the street again and went up the sidewalk past the post office toward the lights of the drugstore on the

corner. Then a car turned left off the highway, and I saw the big gold star on the door. I yelled, and B. J. Oster's face peered out the window at me, and the car slowed to a stop.

I put a hand on the door. My voice sounded very harsh as I said, "The woman who was run down was Mary Farrell. She was murdered."

"Wait a minute, Summers!" Oster protested. "You've kind of got murder on the brain, haven't you?"

"That's her car there. The ignition wires are torn loose. So she had to walk, and they could run her down."

Oster quickly pulled over to the curb and got out. But I didn't join him, I started back toward the hotel. "Hey, wait a minute!" he called.

I turned and said, "You work on this one."

He didn't reply, standing there on the curb watching me, and after a moment I went on again. My eyes felt as though someone had poured hot sand into them.

When I sat down beside her Laura said, "Did you get your call through?"

I shook my head. "Do you know what that siren was?"

"What, Steve?"

"Mary Farrell was just run down and killed."

"Oh!"

"It's my fault. I warned her. I tried— If I'd just kept after her a little longer—or tried again. If I'd—"

"Stop it, Steve."

"If I just hadn't had to show what a hard guy I was last night. If I hadn't tipped my hand—"

"Stop it!"

I waved a hand at the bartender. "Heard the news?" I said when he brought me a drink.

"What's that?"

"A hit-and-run driver just killed Farrell's wife."

He looked at me with his pale expressionless eyes. He scratched his chin. Then he just nodded and went back down the bar.

"That poor little girl!" I said. "So now she's fatherless and motherless too. Why didn't I—"

"Steve," Laura whispered. "Please don't. Did—did he do this too?"

"Had it done, probably." I took a long drink. This was a bad day. They were getting a lot of runs today. Poor Mary Farrell, who must have been frightened so horribly of this, but screwed her courage up to try to beat support for the little crippled girl out of Quaintance, until what must have haunted her night and day happened.

Newman and Erika Gard came in, and I watched them move down to a booth. They took no notice of me.

"Miss Mason?" a voice said. It was the room clerk. "Someone wants you on the phone, Miss Mason."

Laura left with him. I didn't let myself look at Newman and Erika Gard. I kept thinking of Mary Farrell in the dark street with the headlights behind her and the sound of the car's engine growing louder, and the headlights not swerving, and the car engine louder still, and then maybe, at the last second, knowing and trying to run.

Laura came back. Her face looked like wax. "They've arrested Dick," she whispered so hoarsely I could hardly understand her. "They say Dick killed that woman in his car."

four

I

As I drove her up the hill toward the big grey house Laura seemed frozen. Once she whispered, "He couldn't have done it. He was going to bed just when we left."

"He didn't do it. I told you there might be pressure put on you to get rid of me." I turned into the courtyard. The MG was not there. I got the revolver out and stuck it in my belt while Laura ran up to the door. She was hammering on it when I caught up with her.

"What happened?" she cried when Rawles appeared.

Rawles's old pink face was lined and frightened. "I don't know, Miss Laura. They just came and got him—two policemen. They said a woman had been run over and they'd found the little car somewhere, and it was the one that had done it. He was in his room when they came, in his underwear. They—"

"But what'd he say? Didn't he say it wasn't true?"

Rawles ran a hand over his bald head. "He was very angry at first, Miss Laura. He kept shouting that it was a mistake, and then he saw Mr. Quaintance, and he shouted that it was a frame-up. Then all of a sudden he quieted down and told me to get hold of you and Mr. Summers."

I said, "Did you see him leave this house this evening?"

"No, sir."

"Did anybody?"

"Mr. Roney said he saw the car leave, sir. About seven-fifteen, he said he thought it was. He said he thought it was Mr. Dick in it, but he didn't know whether he'd swear to it or not."

"Oh, God," Laura said.

"I took it upon myself to call Mr. Hecht, Miss Laura. Mrs. Mason is ill."

"She would be," Laura said viciously.

"Who's Mr. Hecht?" I asked, hurrying to keep up with her as we went down the hall.

"The lawyer. Can he get Dick out on bail or anything?"

"I should think so."

Quaintance and Roney were in the living room. Quaintance got up as we came in, incredibly handsome in his cashmere suit, his blonde hair shining in the light. He raised a cigarette in the silver holder, blew smoke out his thin nostrils, watched us with narrowed eyes through the smoke. Roney leaned against the fireplace, and I could see the bulge of the gun like a tumour beneath the shoulder of his plaid sport coat.

"Your brother's in pretty serious trouble, Laura," Quaintance said. His face was sympathetic. He didn't look at me; Roney had been assigned to watching me. I buttoned my jacket over the carved butt of Colonel Mason's revolver. "Pretty serious," Quaintance said.

"So Rawles said." Laura looked very calm. "I thought I'd better come home and see what was wrong," she said. "He ran into somebody?"

"Hit and run," Quaintance said. "On Pacific Street, near the post office. A woman named Farrell." He glanced at me with a cold, superior, completely certain look. I remained silent. It looked as though Laura were going to handle this very well, and my turn came later.

"Hit and run," Laura said. "That is serious, isn't it? Like murder."

Quaintance nodded and blew smoke out of his nostrils. "Dick's in a pretty bad spot," he said. Roney leaned against the fireplace with his thumbs hooked into his belt, watching me.

"Rawles said Dick said he didn't do it." For the first time Laura's voice broke a little, but she got it back under control. "Maybe someone stole his car."

"Out of the courtyard here?" Quaintance shook his head

unhappily. "I was sorry for Dick," he said. "He didn't have his story straight. First he claimed it was all a mistake and he knew nothing about it, then that it was a frame-up. By now he's probably run through a dozen different stories. But you see, Laura, I saw him come back to the house just a little while before the police got here."

"You did?" Laura said.

"Evidently he left the car somewhere south of town," Quaintance went on, "and walked back here and got into bed and pretended he'd been taking a nap. That was another silly mistake—the police weren't inclined to believe he was taking a nap at this time of night."

I said, "Roney saw him leave at seven-fifteen, and you saw him come back about eight. Is that right?"

Quaintance nodded. "That's right," Roney said.

"You—" Laura cried shrilly. "Oh, you—" She turned helplessly toward me. "Oh, Steve!"

Quaintance said in a sympathetic voice, "Easy, Laura, we'll figure some way out of it." She swung back toward him. "I did my best," he continued. "George admitted he'd seen Dick leave before I could stop him." He glanced at Roney and said coldly, "That was stupid, George."

"I'm sorry as hell," Roney said. He raised an eyebrow and almost grinned.

"But he caught himself after a while and said he didn't think he could swear it was Dick in the car," Quaintance said. "The top was up, and he couldn't really see. I didn't mention that I'd seen the kid coming back."

He stood there looking at Laura for a long time. Then he bent to stub his cigarette out in an ashtray. "I didn't know what to do," he said. "On the one hand I perjure myself. But on the other hand I'm grateful for the hospitality"—he said the word with the slightest trace of irony—"that I've enjoyed here. And I like Dick. I didn't know what to do. I don't like to see Dick go to prison. He's what? Twenty? His life's just starting—a pretty sad start. I've been thinking of asking George to change his story—say he'd thought it over and now he was sure it wasn't Dick he saw take the

car out, that he'd just assumed it was Dick. I think George might do that." He looked at Roney questioningly.

"Oh, sure," Roney said. "I don't like to see this happen to the poor kid." Laura stepped back and leaned against me. Her arm when I grasped it was very cold.

"And of course instead of admitting I'd seen Dick sneaking back here, I could say I'd been sitting out in the patio all evening and hadn't seen him, so he must've been in his room all that time, since he was there when the police came. But perjury's pretty dangerous."

"Oh, yes," Laura whispered.

"Well, I think we can cut through the rest of this," I said. "If I leave quietly and cause no more trouble, then you two will perjure yourselves, is that it?"

"Put it that way," Quaintance snapped. His voice was abruptly cold and hard as he said to Laura, "Have it either way you want."

Laura whispered, "I don't think he could ever be put in prison. It's such a—a—"

"No?" Quaintance said. "He's got a reputation as a wild driver."

"He sure wheels that little MG around," Roney said.

"One or the other," Quaintance said and inserted another cigarette into the silver holder.

"Now I'll give you a choice," I said.

Quaintance shifted around to face me, his eyes fixed steadily on the bandage on my forehead, one corner of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. "You what?" he said.

"I want an affidavit from Roney swearing that the person who drove that car out of here was not Dick. And one from you that you were in the patio throughout the whole period in question and did not see Dick return."

Roney chuckled, stood erect, and stretched. Quaintance just continued to watch me with the one-sided smile.

I moved over toward the window. The windows of the guest house were lighted squares in the darkness. "Or we'll have to call a surprise witness," I said. "We'll have to subpoena Mr. Black."

It was pleasant to see Quaintance's marble-faced calm shattered so completely. He turned toward the window, then back again; his mouth opened and closed. But after a moment his face froze into expressionlessness. Roney was scowling ferociously.

"Mr. Black," I said. "Laura, is there a notary public you could get to come up here now?"

"Mr. Larsen, the realtor. I think he'd—"

"Ask him to bring his seal and book to notarize a couple of statements. Then get me a typewriter and some Bond paper."

I typed out the two statements. When Mr. Larsen, a tall, jolly man with a bad limp, came, Quaintance and George Roney signed without protest. Quaintance had a somnambulist look. Larsen stamped and signed the affidavits, recorded them in his book, refused a drink, patted Laura's arm, and limped out, passing Rawles on the way. Rawles announced that Mr. Hecht had phoned. Dick was out on bail, and they would be in Helios Beach soon.

Laura clapped her hands and threw her arms around me. I watched Quaintance and Roney leaving the room, the one almost a foot taller and broader than the other. Quaintance turned and threw me a murderous glance just before they vanished into the hall.

I waited until I heard the front door slam, then said, "Give those statements to the lawyer as soon as he comes," and hurried over to the window.

"Are you leaving?" Laura said. "I thought we'd have a drink and—"

"I think I'm going to have to go." I motioned her back as she started toward me. Standing in the shadow, I stared down at the lighted windows of the guest house. I saw headlights flood into its driveway, followed by the long, light-coloured Cadillac. The headlights went out. I saw the light figure of Quaintance in the beige suit detach himself from the car.

Behind a chair near me was a floor lamp with a flexible neck and a bullet-shaped brass reflector. I pulled it to the

edge of the window and aimed it just to the left of the broad pile of lights that was the hotel. I beckoned Laura over away from the window, where Quaintance or Roney wouldn't be able to see us from below.

"Listen, now," I said. "Quaintance is going to get Black out of here tonight, and I don't want to lose him. You stand right here behind the lamp and watch, but keep out of sight. You can see Quaintance's car there in the guest-house drive, and you can see the intersection of the highway, just to the left of the hotel. I'm going to park at the intersection, facing you here. When Quaintance's car leaves you're to flash the lamp on and off. Keep at it till I answer with my headlights. Clear?"

Laura nodded vigorously, her eyes very large. "Steve, who is Black?"

"Damned if I know," I said. "Now, how can I get down to the highway without passing the guest house?"

"Just go south along the crest two blocks and then down."

I left her at a run, backed my car out of the courtyard, drove two blocks south along the crest, and then turned down a narrow street to the highway. I parked on the southwest corner of the intersection, next to the drugstore, facing up the hill. Through the windshield I could see the dim bulk of the Mason house. The wall of windows looked faintly blue, like the side of an aquarium.

I sat with my foot nervously racing the motor. The darkness near me was broken by the sporadic flow of the headlights on the highway, the blue neon sign of the drugstore, the lights of the self-service gas station across the street. I looked at my gas-gauge, which said a little over half full, and hoped they would be taking Black no farther than Los Angeles.

A spot of light showed at the right-hand side of the great window high on the hill, flared, went out, flared again. I blinked my headlights in return, and, in a break in the traffic, made a left turn on to the highway and headed north.

It was a long time, and I was sick with fear that Quaintance had taken Black the other way—down to San Diego—

when the long whitish shape of the Cadillac convertible cruised past me. The top was up, and I could not see inside of it as it passed me, but it was not travelling fast and I had no difficulty keeping up. At the Y north of San Clemente it took the inland route into Los Angeles.

After Santa Ana, on Firestone Boulevard, where the traffic was heavy and there were more and more frequent stop lights, I had a harder time keeping up, but I had done a lot of this in my time, and I never lost sight of the Cadillac. It slowed, passing a motel, then went on again. At the next motel it slowed once more, turned in, and stopped before a sign that said: OFFICE VACANCY. Above the office was a towering orange neon sign that flashed on and off: SOUTH-WEST LODGE.

I drove past, made a U turn that earned me several enemies, and, on the opposite side of Firestone, parked and switched off my lights. I was just in time to see Quaintance enter the office. After a minute or two he came back out, and in the hectic light of the neon sign I saw him get back into the convertible. It moved on down the centre drive of the motel and stopped again at the end cabin on the left. This time three figures left the car.

It was amost half an hour before Quaintance, alone, came out. He turned the Cadillac around. It nosed out of the motel drive on to Firestone, turned left, and was rapidly lost from sight among the other cars.

About fifty yards ahead of me was the Wan-Wun Bar, which favoured red neon. I drove down to it, went inside, and in the phone booth dialled the number listed in the fat Central Section of the Los Angeles telephone book under J. J. Madison, private investigations, and asked for Vic Wertz, who thought that J. J. Madison sounded more impressive than Victor J. Wertz. Vic was at home, a rasping voice informed me, and I called his home number.

"Well, hello, Steve," Vic said. "Long time no see and all that. What's up?"

"I want a man and his wife, and I mean a good sharp man, to camp in a motel and do some heavy watching for

me."

"Where are you?"

"It's the Southwest Lodge, pretty far out on Firestone, a big orange sign on the left. He's to meet me across the street at the Wan-Wun Bar. I'll be sitting in my car, a black forty-nine Ford coupe."

"Okay," Vic said. "It'll be maybe an hour. Does it have to be his wife?"

"Just so he keeps on the ball."

I had two brandies in the Wan-Wun Bar, which was crowded, hot, and noisy, then went out to sit in my car. It was more than an hour before Vic Wertz's man appeared. His name was McCullough, he had sandy hair and a little moustache, and a woman was with him in his car. I briefed him and watched him drive into the Southwest Lodge and, with the woman, go into the first cabin on the right. Then I started back for Helios Beach. I was exhausted.

In my room at the hotel I tried to get Phil Brainerd again. This time the long-distance lines were tied up, and it was after two o'clock before I could get through.

"Well?" I almost shouted.

"Well, nothing—yet," Phil said sleepily. He yawned into the phone. "Did you think I was just going to show those pictures of yours around until somebody said, 'Why, that's Jack the Ripper'? Identification is all system, Steve, and system takes time."

"I haven't got much time!"

"Maybe in the morning," Phil said.

I hung up and went to bed. Everything swung on Black. I cursed Phil Brainerd and his system, just in case they weren't able to make an identification; and Vic Wertz and his man McCullough, in case they lost Black for me. I went off to sleep playing a kind of frantic and desperate game of charades.

2

I woke staring at the grey window and thinking about the *Marina*, and about Billy Farrell and Mary Farrell and the little crippled girl in the hospital in Oakland whom someone was going to have to tell about her mother and father, and about Laura Mason curled up on my lap pretending to be a child again. I thought about Edith Mason slowly drowning herself in gin and vermouth, about Quaintance, America Incorporated, and the country I lived in. I felt drugged and unrested. My watch said 11.45; the grey outside the window was not the grey of just before dawn, but a heavy fog. I dragged myself out of bed and leaned out the open window, taking deep breaths of the damp air and trying to shake off the heavy discouragement I felt.

There was Black, I told myself. Farrell must have run him in from Mexico for Quaintance. Farrell had been blackmailing Quaintance about Black. Farrell—and maybe indirectly Mary Farrell too—had been killed because of Black. Erika Gard might have offered me ten thousand dollars to lay off partly because of Black. Quaintance had backed down last night because of a threat to Black, and had fled to hide Black in a motel in Los Angeles. Identification was system, and system took time. Ultimately Phil Brainerd should be able to tell me who Black was.

I realized suddenly that it was Friday, and that the America Incorporated convention at Helios Beach began tomorrow.

I went into the bathroom to shave. I stared at the darkly tanned face, at the lines at the corners of my mouth and the pouches below my eyes; I looked as old and tired as Lucifer. The bandage around my head was limp and soiled. When I had shaved and taken a shower I had to put a dirty shirt on. Just as I had finished dressing there was a knock at the door. I went to open it.

Simpering at me was a very pretty boy with blondined hair combed back into a ducktail. He wore an enormously

long blue jacket with brass buttons, and a silk tie with brown horseheads painted on it. "Are you Mr. Summers?"

I said I was.

"Mr. Raile would like to see you, sir, if you have a few moments."

"Mr. Warren Raile?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did Mr. Warren Raile arrive?"

"A little while ago. He seems anxious to see you, sir, if—"

"I'm sure. All right, I'll be there right away. What room?"

"Three-oh-two." He gave me the simper again, turned, and moved away down the hall. He walked with short, mincing steps, his elbows held close to his body in a kind of caricature of a pansy's walk. I closed the door, buttoned my coat over the .38 revolver, felt to see if my bandage was on straight, and went upstairs to see Mr. Warren Raile.

The door of Room 302 was opened for me by an enormous Negro with a vicious, pock-marked face. He wore a tunic, tight breeches, and highly polished black polo boots. In the room, standing among a great many matched cordovan-leather suitcases, were Quaintance, Erika Gard, and Raile himself, who was having his cigar lit for him by the pansy. I had seen only photographs of him before—the small one, taken when he must have been twenty years younger, that was inset at the top of his newspaper column; and the direct and immediate image on the television screen, which lied too, because it showed him always behind a desk, where he looked only respectably stout. He was enormously, majestically fat, but the fat was nearly all belly. Except for it he would have been a tall, fatty one-hundred-and-ninety-pounder, but he must have weighed two-fifty. He advanced on me, holding out his hand, a hospitable grin on his face, which was as pink and soft-looking as a baby's. He had round, blue, baby's eyes, over which jutted the great brushes of eyebrows. His coarse grey hair was crew-cut. "So this is the very active Mr. Summers," he said in his lisping voice, and cocked one of the whiskbroom eyebrows at the sight of

the bandage around my head. I gripped his sweaty, oleaginous palm, and released it quickly.

"We have much to discuss, Mr. Summers," Raile said. As he spoke he smiled confidently and steadily at a point just above my eyes. Quaintance stood by the window, half turned away. Erika Gard had seated herself in a foam-rubber and iron-rod chair and was regarding me with nettled disapproval. The pansy simpered. The Negro stood at ease before the door.

"The time has come for us to settle our differences, Mr. Summers," Raile said. His smile grew broader; it was kind, all-understanding, fatherly—or big-brotherly. "I don't like friction, Mr. Summers," he said. "I apologize for some of the actions of my people here. But you must realize that you've made them very nervous. Now, will you tell me what was the cost of your boat?"

"Eighteen thousand dollars," I said.

Raile waved his cigar like a magic wand. "Bobby!"

The pansy opened a cordovan-leather briefcase, took out three packets of bills, and handed them to Raile. "We'll take three thousand off for depreciation, shall we?" Raile said, and handed them to me. But I shook my head.

Raile's smile faded a little. "No? I must say you're higher-priced than you look, Mr. Summers."

"I'm a gambler. I wouldn't ever sell my sweepstakes ticket before the race."

"Are you expecting more money than this? If you are, I'm afraid—"

"Not money."

"Not money," Raile said, nodding philosophically. He puffed a cloud of expensive smoke. "Then we will not talk in terms of money. Is there something else we should talk in terms of, Mr. Summers?"

"We could talk in terms of Quaintance, but that wouldn't do any good either. Quaintance has committed two murders and burned my boat in an attempt on my life, but he was only acting for you, and—"

"Mr. Summers," Raile interrupted, "does your head pain

you very terribly?"

Erika Gard cackled, and Bobby smiled approvingly, but I was glad to see that Quaintance was in no mood for humour.

I said to Raile, "You mean to the point of hallucinations? Well, I do have a hallucination to the effect that I have enough evidence collected to convict Quaintance of murder."

That wiped the smiles off their faces. I watched the Negro out of the corners of my eyes.

"I believe—" Raile said, and stopped and took a long pull on his cigar. "I believe you're lying, Mr. Summers. But as I think Miss Gard pointed out to you the other night, you are in a position to make yourself very troublesome to us because of the convention here tomorrow. I wish we could merely ignore you, as we try to ignore all of the many crackpots who beset us. But in this case we cannot, and we have had to go to some trouble in order to protect ourselves." He smiled the big-brotherly smile. "Research," he said. "Bobby, the dossier." He waved his cigar again, and Bobby brought out of the briefcase a fat manilla envelope.

"Russell, this is your forte," Raile said and waved the cigar again, and Bobby handed the envelope to Quaintance. Raile sat down and smirked up at me. Quaintance sat down too. He jerked his head at the pansy, who hurried to stack suitcases in front of him until Quaintance had a low cordovan-leather desk. He took a sheaf of papers from the envelope, shuffled through them, and brought out some clipped-together sheets. He frowned at them thoughtfully.

"Robert Mercer," he said. He glanced up at me with his frigid eyes. "A very close friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"He was, in the middle nineteen-thirties. He was killed in the Spanish Civil War."

"Fighting for the Communists," Quaintance said. "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade is, of course, a subversive organization."

Bob Mercer had not been a Communist or anything near it, but I realized that he was now officially damned as one.

I said, "Let me point out that he was killed some time before the brigade was declared subversive."

Quaintance looked up without interest as I spoke. Raile's cigar stuck out of his mouth like a long tan bowsprit; his hands were folded on his belly. Erika Gard stared at me with cold fury, as though I were holding up the procedure with completely irrelevant objections and would soon take refuge behind the Fifth Amendment.

Quaintance said, "John Borowski. Another friend of yours?"

I nodded. Quaintance studied the paper he held. "According to their records, John Borowski was one of the organizers of the Spanish War Orphans Fund. He is listed on their letterheads as, at different times, vice-chairman, treasurer, and board member—"

"Was listed," I said.

"The Spanish War Orphans Fund was declared subversive in nineteen-forty-six by the Attorney General," Quaintance went on in the disinterested, icy voice. "We haven't had time to check all their records to see if you were a contributor, but—"

"I was. In nineteen-forty and forty-one, and maybe in forty-two. At the beginning the Spanish War Orphans Fund was non-partisan, and money went to orphans of parents of both sides. Long before it was declared subversive John Borowski resigned because he felt it had been taken over by Communist sympathizers and was becoming political." But I felt badly on the defensive now, and I had encountered the first gap in my memory—which was how many years I had contributed to the Spanish War Orphans Fund.

Raile was chuckling silently, his belly bouncing like Saint Nick's. Suddenly I felt very conscious of the eyes watching me, and it was an effort to keep from looking around to gauge the meaning in the expression on each of those faces. I tried to tell myself I was only interested in learning what they had been able to dig up on me, but this interrogation had a grip that was stronger than merely that.

"Barnard James Eastman," Quaintance said.

The name was not familiar, and I shook my head.

"You won't deny that he was a classmate of yours at the University of Southern California?"

I couldn't very well deny it, not knowing him. I had had an enormous number of classmates at USC. Almost angrily I hated my memory from scurrying off after names.

"Assistant Professor Barnard Eastman was dismissed from the faculty of the University of Texas as a Communist and now teaches at Tanner College in Connecticut, where he has twice refused to testify before Congressional committees by invoking the Fifth Amendment. Do you deny any of this?"

"No," I said, and took out my pipe and filled it.

"Bobby," Raile said, and Bobby hurried over to light my pipe for me. Quaintance shuffled through his papers, and I saw a corner of his mouth curl up smugly as he drew one out.

Looking up at me, he said, "Your brother, William McNeill Summers, who died in nineteen-forty-seven in Washington, possibly by his own hand, was named by a great many government witnesses as a card-carrying Communist and traitor and intimate of R. P. Silver, the Russian agent."

I heard a sharp intake of breath from Erika Gard. The pansy, Bobby, was looking at me with affected horror, still holding the match with which he had lit my pipe. Raile chuckled again, a little more audibly. Quaintance stared up at me with the one-sided smile.

I didn't say anything. McNeill had been my mother's name, which was probably how they had come to make the mistake. But I had never had a brother. Well, I thought, it was probably an honest error, and they had, after all, had to do a hurry-up job. But I didn't feel like laughing at them.

Nor did I want this to stop. This was more and more a common experience now, and I had never completely understood it before. I was hammered at by a great number of fears that I tried to analyze objectively: there was a fear for my country; there was an emphatic fear for the innocents who must undergo this when it really counted—for no one is completely innocent; there was a more personal fear, be-

cause my sister's husband was a bright young economist in the Department of the Interior in Washington, and if I were somehow circumstantially damned so might he, that staunch conservative, be; there was even the fear that their statement about my brother, true or not, was all that mattered, that the fact that I had never even had a brother was extraneous. I knew the vague and awful realization all who underwent this must feel—that somewhere along the years they had acted badly or foolishly and were guilty of something that could be classified, if the lines were drawn finely enough, as disloyal; that once they had contributed to the wrong cause, let their names be used by the wrong organization, known the wrong friends, and that they had forgotten so many seemingly insignificant details of their lives. I had a glimpse of how the half-truths and quarter-truths began to become homogenized—like adding apples and oranges to get lemons—into what might seem a whole truth. And I could feel too—understand it, anyway—the contempt of the real Communist for this process because it had been for so long a part of his life and method, and in the hands of masters, and because of the amateurish errors like the one about my brother.

I remembered and saw more clearly now how the old Bolsheviks in the purges of the thirties must have been conditioned—hour after day after week of this—and the breakdown of the Americans in the Chinese prison camps, and the Catholic bishops in central Europe; the endless repetitive flow of half- and quarter-truths, the facts and quotations out of context, the always-available witnesses, the slightly twisted figures, the ill-remembered dates and so the inadvertent lies. All were marched and counter-marched, trimmed here, expanded there, painted this colour or that, revolved, turned upside down and inside out, and then returned to you again, unrecognizable and yet finally undeniable under the cold, repeated statements of the inquisitors, until the ultimate lie could become the only reality and so the only truth.

Having floored me with his Sunday punch, Quaintance

went on somewhat anti-climatically to mention that I had been fired from the Peninsula City, California, police force in 1948. "For what?" he asked abruptly.

"I wasn't fired," I said. "I was—"

"You deny that you were fired," Quaintance said. He glanced toward Raile, then up at me again. "Do you also deny that in nineteen-forty-nine you worked for Wallace Bane, the former president of the Mariner's Brotherhood and a confessed Communist?"

I shrugged. Now I was tired of it. The agency I had worked for briefly after quitting the Peninsula City police force had done some work for Wallace Bane, whose wife was divorcing him. He had wanted to counter-sue her for adultery, and the work, as far as I'd known, had been only routine divorce work; I had not been assigned to the case.

"You deny it?" Quaintance asked in a sharp tone.

"Yes," I said. "Come to think of it, I deny everything."

Raile chuckled quite loudly, and Erika Gard snorted. Raile said, "Even what can be proved by witnesses and records, Mr. Summers?"

"Witnesses and records are no more reliable than the people who use them," I said. "I deny everything on the basis premise that in the mouths of liars everything is a lie."

"You're something of a philosopher, Mr. Summers."

Looking up from his papers again, Quaintance said, "Are you aware of the fact that in nineteen-fifty Laura Mason belonged to a political club called the Protean League, which advocated such things as—"

"Oh, stuff it," I said.

Raile frowned heavily and rose. "And now, Mr. Summers, it's time for you to make up your mind." He waved his cigar at me. "Either you can accept what seems to me the excessive sum of fifteen thousand dollars and decamp, or you can do your worst. If we receive any adverse publicity from your activities we will be forced to defend ourselves. We have collected quite a lot of evidence to the effect that you are politically unstable if not downright disloyal to your country, that you have maintained close contact and

are even closely related to known and proven traitors. In other words, Mr. Summers, I think we can make a very good case that your activities constitute part of a Communist plot against us. Now what do you say?"

They all watched me. I wondered if any of them really thought I would knuckle under. As a matter of fact, I supposed they all did, except Quaintance, who ought to know better.

I said, "You know, I think I might be able to take you."

Raile smiled, but it was not the genuine article. No one else smiled at all. I turned a little so I could keep an eye on the Negro guarding the door.

"At least I'll have Quaintance," I went on. "I think I can risk my reputation for a prize like that."

Quaintance's face reddened furiously. He got to his feet. As he did so the topmost sheet on his stack planed down to the floor. Before the pansy could stoop to retrieve it I saw the name typed in caps at the upper right-hand corner of the page: MASON, COL. RICHARD E.

I turned away and moved toward the door. The Negro still barred it. "All right, Ralph," Raile said.

As the Negro moved I jumped to one side and brought out the .38 that had belonged to Mason, Col. Richard E. But the Negro just grinned; he had only been stepping out of my way.

"You're nervous, Mr. Summers," Raile said behind me with a throaty chuckle.

He was right. I went on out. The Negro closed the door behind me. I started down the hall. My shirt was stuck against my back with sweat; I was nervous all right. I tucked the revolver back in my belt and went downstairs.

There was a telegram for me at the desk:

SEE YOU THIS AFTERNOON. PHIL.

3

It was almost four o'clock when I found Phil Brainerd standing in the lobby of the hotel beside a black leather Gladstone bag, watching workmen wheeling a massive TV camera into the dining room. Seeing him, I felt as though the Marines had landed.

He gave me a casual glance to see if I wanted to know him or not.

I nodded back just as casually. Four very respectable-looking women and an elderly man were registering at the desk; since noon there had been a steady flow of people checking into the hotel. Phil moved over toward me and said, "I wonder if you could tell me where I can get something to eat? They seem to be working in the dining room."

"There's a café just down the block," I said. I nodded again to him, went outside and down the highway past the drugstore to the 101 Café, where Phil joined me in a few minutes. Short, a little tubby now, grey-haired, and wearing a conservative grey business suit, he looked like a bank vice-president or a well-to-do insurance salesman.

We sat down in a booth beside a jukebox glowing with red and yellow lights.

"Glad to see you," I said.

"Sorry I was so long." He looked up with his mild smile as the waitress came to the table, and ordered a ham omelette, toast, and coffee. "I didn't get any lunch today," he explained.

"Who is he?" I demanded when the waitress had gone.

Phil was frowning at the bandage on my head. "Well, now," he said in his slow voice, "suppose you tell me what's been going on down here first."

I looked at him for a moment. Then I took a deep breath and said, "All right, I'll tell you as much as I know without knowing who Black is. There was a man here in Helios Beach named Farrell who had a fast skiff with an inboard motor—he had a racket running marijuana in from Mexico.

He was murdered about two weeks ago—pushed off the pier. He was a friend of mine, which is how I happened to get involved here in the first place.”

“You have interesting friends.”

“Don’t interrupt. Now, about three months ago Quaintance arrived in Helios Beach as a guest, and later the lover, of Mrs. Mason. About a month ago, as near as I can find out, he hired Farrell to run Black in from Mexico. Farrell either found out who Black was or guessed he was important, dropped the marijuana-running, and began blackmailing Quaintance. Quaintance finally got tired of it, knocked him on the head with a lug wrench one dark night, dropped him off the end of the pier, and hammered off a section of railing to make it look as though Farrell fell by accident. I’ve got the story now, I’ve checked the lug wrench and the piece of railing with the deputy here, and all I need is Black’s identity for the motive to make my case.”

Phil grunted and studied my head again.

“All in good time,” I said. “Early in the game Laura and Dick Mason came to me with a proposition that I hire out to get their stepmother rid of Quaintance, whom they don’t like. Since I’d seen Quaintance at Mary Farrell’s house I was interested. But Quaintance was also interested in me. He found out who I was and ordered me out of town, and I had some fisticuffs with him and his bodyguard. That was day before yesterday, and that night they laid for me on my boat, knocked me down, and burned the *Marina*.”

Phil grunted again. The waitress came with two cups of coffee, and he spooned sugar into his.

“I said I’d seen Farrell’s wife with Quaintance,” I went on. “She was blackmailing Quaintance because she knew he’d murdered her husband. Last night she was run down by a hit-and-run driver and killed. It was either Quaintance or his bodyguard—think the bodyguard. She—”

“She doesn’t sound very intelligent,” Phil said.

I leaned toward him. “Listen, now. Quaintance has been acting throughout all this as the agent for America Incorporated.” I leaned back. I had thought the statement would

surprise him, but he only nodded.

"That's it in brief," I said. "There's a little more, but we'll get to that later. What about Black?"

The waitress brought his omelette. He took a big bite while I sat watching him, fuming. He said, "I'm sorry, Steve."

"You're sorry for what?"

"I can't tell you who he is. It's pretty high-level stuff. You're going to forget your Mr. Black, Steve. Where is he now?"

He said it as though it were a minor disappointment which I would have to grin and bear. I said as calmly as I could, "I asked you first."

He shook his head.

"Look," I said, leaning toward him again. "I found him. I'm going to turn him over to you as a gift. But I need to use him for something first, and I have to know who he is."

"I'm sorry, Steve," Phil said. He was maddeningly prim sometimes. "I'll have to ask you to—"

"You'll have to ask me nothing. You can damn well wait till I'm finished with him or go roll your hoop. You won't get him without my help."

"If you won't co-operate I'll have some men up here and shake this town down, Steve. It won't take us long to find him."

"He's not in this town. I had a hunch you might be this way. You hidebound bureaucrats are scared to stick your necks out far enough to tie your ties in the morning." I jabbed my finger down on the table. "I know where he is, and I'm going to turn him over to you, but before you get your Johnny-come-lately paws on him you're going to tell me who he is."

Phil Brainerd regarded me without rancour, although he probably hadn't been talked to this way since he'd become such a big shot. But then I didn't think I'd ever known him to get mad; anger might interfere with the best performance of his duty, which was what he was plotting now, and so he dispensed with it. I watched him dig into his ham

omelette again.

I said, "I want a full account of who Black is, what he is, when, where, why, and whatsoever. You can let me know what's classified, if anything is, and I won't reveal it. Tonight I'll go get him and bring him back here, and tomorrow I intend to tell a great many people who Black is. Tomorrow, probably by noon, you can have him."

Phil Brainerd half closed his eyes to show he was very tired and being very patient, and shook his head. "Sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry too. Because you're not doing me any good, and so I'm not doing you any good. Get back on a plane and fly north again."

"Steve, you're interfering with the government," Phil said. "I will tell you this. Your man is a dangerous man. He's in this country illegally. He—"

"Did you know he was in this country?"

"No."

"Then I think the government is beholden to me for letting you know, isn't it? I claim a return favour."

"You don't claim favours from the government," Phil said and took a sip of coffee.

"I'm doing it. I'm serious, Phil. You can take it or leave it. I will contract to turn up Black for you tomorrow if you'll tell me what I want to know about him now. I intend to repeat that information, but I'll promise not to repeat anything that's classified. And I want you to arrest Black in front of a group of people. After you give me the information I want, you can disregard me and Black until tomorrow, when I produce him—or you can stick with me *ex officio*, and I mean *ex officio*, and engage in a little kidnapping expedition tonight."

"You're putting me in a very difficult position."

"Too bad."

He looked sour. He finished his omelette and started on toast and jelly; he had quite an appetite. Suddenly he said, "What's your object, Steve?"

"I want to make a dent in America Incorporated. I feel

pretty strongly about it."

"That's quite a project."

"I've been working up to it, with their help. I finally decided maybe I was man enough to go after them. If I flop I flop, but it's not going to be because of your schoolgirl reticence."

"Now, see here, Steve—"

"Tell me about Black."

Phil buttered another piece of toast and spread jelly on it; chewing on it, he scowled at me. He said, "You said there was more you had to tell me." He was hedging now, but in the end he was going to have to tell me what I wanted to know. I decided it might not be a good idea to force him any more.

"Well," I said, "I told you Mary Farrell was run down last night and killed. The car they used belongs to Dick Mason. This was a double move: to get rid of Mary Farrell, and to get rid of me. Dick was on the hook unless his sister could get me to take a walk. I don't think it's occurred to Quaintance that I might be in this for ideological reasons as well as pay. We'll say he played his jack. I put on the queen by mentioning Black and got him to sign an alibi for Dick Mason. He played his king and got Black out of Helios Beach last night—"

"And you played the ace and followed him," Phil said.

"Yes," I said. "So I've got an ace to call out your king, too."

"Steve, I'll hold you responsible if this man gets away."

"He won't get away."

"I think you're underestimating these people."

"No, I don't underestimate them. They've already tried to kill me once, and I've been threatened, each time by a more authoritative bracket—first by Quaintance, then by Erika Gard, this morning by Raile himself. I don't underestimate them, and I don't want to get knocked off, particularly before I get in my forty whacks tomorrow. I'm afraid, now that Quaintance thinks Black is safe, there will be more pressure put on Dick and Laura—for one thing, I think

Quaintance may have dredged up some muck on Colonel Mason, or nastier persuasions still. I'm afraid of quite a few things, but—"

"If you'd only turn everything over to us—"

"No," I said and shook my head. "I can't trust you. You're not as free as I am. I hold a lot of cards. I've got nothing but my own conscience to answer to. I'm the lad who can turn the trick. If you'll get busy and tell me about Black, eighteen hours should see it all over."

Phil produced one of his English Ovals, lit it, and blew smoke at me. "So a dénouement on a coast-to-coast TV hookup is what you're after," he said. "And you pretended to be running away from the publicity you got on that Westhaven affair."

I grinned back at him.

"Actually," he said, "I'm down here on a few days' vacation—not officially at all. To do a little fishing with my old friend Steve Summers, and maybe play a little cribbage if we get time."

"You can show up at the convention tomorrow, just as a matter of seeing the local points of interest," I said.

But he frowned again; he wasn't quite ready yet. I said, "Oh, before I forget it, there's another thing I want you to do for me. Farrell and his wife were dealing in blackmail to keep their little girl in a hospital in Oakland. She has cerebral palsy. I want you to call up there and have one of your boy scouts go across the bay to see her. He's got a rotten job; he has to tell her that her mother and father are dead. He's to tell the hospital administration that her bills will be taken care of. Give my name, and the Bank of America in Singer's Harbour as a reference. Her name is Mirrilees Farrell. I don't know the name of the hospital, but it's a cerebral-palsy centre and it's supposed to be the best on the Coast. Also your man might see if Farrell deposited with her any document implicating Quaintance if he were killed."

Phil nodded. "I know the man for it. All right, Steve." He stared at me intently for a long time. Then he said, "Steve, I'm warning you, if he gets away—"

"You come along tonight and help me see that he doesn't."

He sighed. He looked at his watch. He stubbed out his English Oval. "All right," he said unhappily, and began to tell me about Black. It took him a long time to tell it, and after he had left me alone in the 101 Café while he went to phone his office in San Francisco to send someone over to see Mirrilees, it took me a long time to digest what he had told me. It wasn't quite what I had figured out, but it would do.

4

In the darkness pierced by the never-ending stream of headlights coming south toward me on Highway 101, I pushed my car up to seventy going toward Los Angeles. Colonel Mason's .38 was in my coat pocket. Phil Brainerd slumped down beside me with the brim of his grey hat pulled down over his eyes against the oncoming lights. He was the nerveless type, and I was very glad that he was along.

I felt as tense as a clenched fist. I had spent the last several hours realizing how important this was, the responsibility that I had taken on myself, and I had been watching the responsibility expanding beyond tomorrow, out and away into a life I wanted no part of but could not control or avoid if I succeeded tonight and tomorrow. Too much had been set rolling now, and I could see the hill growing steeper downward and the snowball gathering mass and impetus as it rolled.

"How about a swallow of brandy?" Phil said, and handed me a little pocket flask. The brandy was warm in my stomach, but only for a moment.

It was nine-thirty when I came into Santa Ana. On the freeway I accelerated again, then slowed into the traffic of Firestone Boulevard. I saw the blinking orange light in the distance. It grew steadily larger until I pulled in among the cars parked around the Wan-Wun Bar. I had phoned Vic

Wertz to meet me there. Across the boulevard the tall neon sign flicked on and off: SOUTHWEST LODGE.

A lanky figure separated itself from the darkness and moved up to my window. "Steve?" It was Vic Wertz, all hunched-over six feet five of him. He put a hand the size of a tennis racket in the window for me to shake. "Hi, boy."

I introduced Phil, and the big hand reached across me. "I'll get Mac over here," Vic said. "You about ready to make your move?"

"Unless there's a reason to wait until later."

"Let's see what Mac says." He moved away and leaned in the window of a grey coupe parked nearby. A horn blared a shave-and-a-haircut.

Vic Wertz came back and stuck his head in my window. "There's some guns over there, Mac said," he whispered. "One, anyway. Who's the guy getting all this attention, Steve?"

"It'll be in the papers tomorrow or the next day."

Phil chuckled.

"What page?" Vic asked.

"Front."

Vic whistled and peered at me. "Old Steve," he said. "By God, as soon as I heard your voice last night I knew there was going to be some excitement." Phil chuckled again. A car pulled in on the far side of us, and two men got out and walked around my car and into the Wan-Wun Bar.

Vic's man McCullough appeared. "Let's get in the car with a little light," he said briskly. "I got a layout drawn here." He and Vic got into the back seat. I turned on the domelight, and McCullough unfolded a sheet of paper on top of the back of the front seat. It was a plan of the motel, U-shaped, with the cabins on the left side numbered from 1 to 10, those on the right 11 to 20. At the bottom of the U a car was drawn and marked with an X. Number 1 cabin was labelled "Office," number 10, "Subject." There were circles in cabins 2, 3, 5, 12, and 20; oblongs for cars were carefully drawn in the corresponding garages; and the circle in 20 was shaded in.

"Subject's in number 10 at the back," McCullough said. "I think there's a guy in there with him, but I'm not sure—there's been some shuffling around since you left," he said to me. "There is a guy in that car parked at the end there, is why I've been afraid to wander down to do much looking around. Marge saw the guy once with the binocs, and she says he's packing a rod. There's people in cabins 2, 3, 5, and 12, besides subject in 10 and us in 20 and the manager and his wife in 1."

I looked down at the diagram in the dim light. I said, "Vic, you and your man go in in your car first. Stop at the office and check in, so the manager doesn't come running out, and then drive on down to the end as though you've got cabin 11. Park next to the car where the guard is and take him. We'll be waiting right across Firestone, and you blink your tail lights as soon as you've got the guard. Blink them if it's gone quietly, leave them on if there's been noise enough to raise anybody."

"Ay, ay," said Vic.

I said to Phil, "As soon as he flashes his tail lights I'll drive in—slowly if there hasn't been a fuss, fast if there has. You and I will go in after Black while Vic and McCullough camp on the guard. How are the doors?" I asked McCullough. "Flimsy?"

"Yeah, cheap stuff."

"I think the thing to do is to hit the door and hope to hell it gives, and catch them before they have time to get ready for anything. How does that sound?"

"You're the boss," Phil said in his mild voice.

"The door'll give," McCullough said.

"When's jump-off?" Vic asked. Everyone seemed cooler than I was.

"Right now," I said. "Vic, I want you to come with us afterwards."

Vic nodded, and he and McCullough got out and moved over to the grey coupe. I backed around, turned out on to the highway, and drove past the Southwest Lodge. The neon sign blinked on and off. Farther down Firestone were the

lights of a serve-yourself gas station, but between it and the Wan-Wun Bar were vacant lots. I made a U-turn and parked where I had the night before, where we could see straight into the centre of the motel. I could make out the sedan, parked at the end of the U; several cabins had lights burning. The orange neon sign blazed on and snapped off with a maddening mechanical precision. Cars rushed by on Firestone.

"There he goes," Phil said.

The grey coupe turned into the motel drive and stopped at the office. In the intermittent light of the sign I saw Vic's tall figure get out of the car. The sign snapped on and off, on and off, like a signal marking the passage of the seconds and a machine somehow forcing them along. The tall figure came out of the office again and got into the coupe. The coupe moved on down the drive, its lights bathing the parked sedan at the end. Then it stopped beside the sedan, its lights were turned off, and I could see no more.

We waited. I could hear Phil sucking at his teeth. The neon sign flicked the seconds past. I found that my fist was patting up and down on my leg.

The tail lights of the coupe glowed red, darkened, glowed red, darkened, in almost the same rhythm as the sign. They blinked three times and then remained dark.

I blew out my breath in a long sigh, raced the motor, looked in the rear-view mirror, swung the car across Firestone and in under the blinking orange sign, got out, and went up a brick walk to the door marked OFFICE.

Inside, the manager put a key and the pad of registration blanks in front of me with swollen, arthritic hands. I signed in as Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Davis. "How much?"

"Six," he said, carefully not looking out of the screen door at the car. I gathered that he was used to mildly illicit traffic.

I gave him six dollars, took the key, and went outside again. Everything seemed very quiet; even the rush of the cars going past on the highway was hushed. I got in behind the wheel and engaged the clutch. Phil was leaning forward

in his seat.

Leaving the lights on, I drove slowly down toward the end of the U, where the grey coupe and the sedan were parked side by side. In the lights I saw Vic Wertz crouched between them; he held up a circled thumb and forefinger and pointed into the sedan.

I stopped beside the sedan and snapped off the lights, but not before I had seen the light patch of McCullough's sports shirt in the back seat, next to a darker shape. I got out, and Phil joined me on the walk before cabin 10, where striated light shone out through a venetian blind. I took Colonel Mason's revolver out of my pocket and went up the walk at a run.

Just before I reached the door I turned and hit the panel beside the knob with my hip. The door held, and I crashed against it painfully; then, taking my full weight, it tardily screeched and shivered open. I half fell inside, gained my balance, and swung to the right in a little entry hall to face two men, both of them rising, both in shirt sleeves, with their mouths gaping open. Black was getting up from a little desk where a chess set was laid out; Arthur Newman rose from the bed, still clutching a magazine in one hand, while with the other, leaning forward, he fumbled in his coat, which was laid over the foot of his bed. I jumped toward him and slammed the barrel of the revolver against the side of his head. He flopped back on the bed.

Phil's voice said behind me, "Don't touch it, Rodel."

I took a big, heavy colt .45 from under Newman's coat and stuck it into my own coat pocket. He had both hands to the side of his face and was groaning shrilly. I turned toward Black, who stood frozen before the little desk, with his hands held out spread-fingered before him, like a pianist about to begin a concert. He stood very erect; he was slim and tall and looked muscular and young, but he must have been sixty. His proud face with its long upper lip, thin, sculptured nose, crookedly cleft chin, was completely calm now, but I could see the pulse beating in his throat. There was a Luger on the desk beside the chess set, which was a

cheap one—red and black plastic figures on red and black squared cardboard. Beside the desk, leaning against one leg, was a black briefcase with a heavy chrome lock. I stepped over and put the Luger in my other pocket, picked up the briefcase.

"Let's go," I said.

Black glanced out of the corners of his eyes at the briefcase. Phil Brainerd stood in the doorway with the brim of his grey hat pulled low over his eyes, the muzzle of his Colt .32 aimed at Black's right kneecap. "Up!" I said to Newman, and he got to his feet, groaning. He staggered and held on to the foot of the bed. The side of his head was bleeding slightly. "Get going," I said, and he moved dazedly out past Phil Brainerd. I motioned to Black to follow him.

Newman screamed, and with the scream began a long, echoing, shattering, crashing roar that after the first shock broke itself up into a series of very rapid explosions—an automatic gun of some kind. Phil yelled, "Down!" just as I grabbed Black's arm and threw him down and dived to the floor beside him. The window blew up in fragments, and there was the shriek of a ricochet, then silence, the deepest silence I had ever heard. Then came another reverberating, crashing burst of gunfire, and plaster leaped off the wall beneath the window, and a metal wastebasket jumped and rolled over; the second burst had been lower.

"Somebody'd better get him," I heard Phil mutter, just as there were four spaced, sharper-sounding pistol shots, then two more, then the heavy silence again. Somewhere someone began to scream.

"All clear!" a high voice called—Vic Wertz's voice. I scrambled to my feet and pulled Black up and shoved Col. Mason's revolver against his back, gripping the briefcase with my other hand. Phil started cautiously out the door. "All clear!" Vic called again. We went out. Newman lay on the walk, doubled up with his arms crossed over his stomach, groaning.

"We'll have to leave him," I said. "The police should be here any minute." Then I saw figures converging in the light

from the blinking sign, and there were too many of them. I stopped and brought my gun up.

"Hold it, Steve," Phil said. He said more loudly, "Brainerd here."

A flashlight beam came on and caught his face, then blazed into mine so that I had to look aside. With the light on it, Black's shirt looked phosphorescent. Another flashlight beam came on. There were two of them. I cursed Phil Brainerd. The second flashlight was turned on to a man sprawled down the steps of cabin 12—George Roney in his flashy sports coat, with his arms flung out ahead of him, and on the bricks beyond his hands a black automatic pistol with a wire stock. He didn't move. Then the flashlight beam turned to Vic Wertz, as he scratched the side of his head with the muzzle of his revolver, his long bloodhound's face sadder and more anxious-looking than usual; to McCullough, standing back between the grey coupe and the sedan, looking very frightened. I wondered how I looked. Again I cursed Phil Brainerd, who must have had us tailed all the way.

I hoisted Black's briefcase up under my arm with the last, vain hope that they wouldn't take that away from me too. As I did so I saw Black's chilled-bone face shift a little, his eyes slide toward the briefcase. Suddenly I laughed aloud.

"Checkmate," I said. "No, call off your troops, Phil—or I'll open the briefcase." I dropped my gun into my pocket; the weight of the three guns pulled my coat down heavily on my shoulders. I held up the briefcase with my hand on the chrome lock. "Shall I open it, Rodel?"

I laughed hysterically to see him flinch. "It's booby-trapped, isn't it? All right, Phil, send your boys away or I'll—"

"Stop making an ass of yourself," Phil said. "All right, Bailey, you and Curro clean up here. The one man's dead, that one's badly hurt. There's another in the Buick over there—I think, unharmed. See that the two of them are wrapped up tight until you hear from me tomorrow. Well, hadn't we better go?" he said to me.

I was glad no one turned a flashlight into my face again as I pushed Black toward my car and motioned Vic Wertz into the back seat with him. I backed around and waited while Phil gave some last instructions to one of the FBI men. Then, as he got in beside me, I started forward, past George Roney sprawled dead down the steps of cabin 12, and, opposite him, Newman, sitting up now, with his hands still to his stomach and the other FBI men leaning over him; past cabins 8 and 7, 6 and 5, where two white faces watched through the window; past 4, which was dark; 3, where there were two more faces, the girl nude and dodging back; past 2, where a single eye showed at a lifted corner of the venetian blind; past the office—the manager wasn't in sight—and out on to Firestone Boulevard and left toward Helios Beach. I didn't turn on my lights until I had made the turn.

In the distance now I could hear a siren. Phil carefully took the briefcase from the seat beside me and held it in his lap.

"Thanks for not trumping my ace," I said.

"You ought to learn to trust your friends, Steve."

"I've been mingling with the wrong set, I guess." I glanced in the rear-view mirror at my man Black, who was sitting up stiffly with his arms folded and one of Vic's big hands on his shoulder.

"This is going to cost you, Steve," Vic said. "I come high for gun work. Who the hell was that guy with the bullet machine?"

"His name was George Roney," I said. "And God bless you for the gun work."

"I had to give it to him, didn't I?"

Phil swivelled around in his seat, still carefully gripping the briefcase. "What's the matter here?" he said. "I thought you big, tough private operators shot up a couple of gunmen every day before breakfast."

"I was a virgin," Vic said, in an attempt at a humorously mournful tone, but he sounded as though he was badly shaken at having killed a man. I nudged Phil, and he turned back. I drove southeast along Firestone Boulevard, neither

slow nor fast. Behind us the siren was no longer audible.

From time to time I looked into the rear-view mirror and watched Friedrich Rodel gazing stonily out the window.

five

I

In another motel, this one in Crown Bay, I lounged in an easy chair, watching Phil Brainerd sitting before a low tile-topped table, staring down at the briefcase with a frown of concentration. Beyond him, in a chair in the doorway to the bedroom, Vic Wertz sat, his back to us, and beyond him I could see a part of the bed and Rodel's grey-clad legs stretched out on the blue bedspread.

"Haven't you had any experience dealing with booby traps?" Phil said.

"None," I said. "And if you're going to fiddle with that I wish you'd take another cabin at the other end of the motel."

I saw one of Rodel's legs move a little. Vic Wertz turned his long face to gaze at us nervously over his shoulder. Phil didn't touch the briefcase.

"Well, it's Central Intelligence's meat, anyway," he said. He raised his arms and stretched. Then he picked up the briefcase very carefully, rose, put it on the baggage rack inside the closet, and closed the closet door. "It's impounded," he said with a severe glance at me. "And I mean it," he said.

"You can have it."

In the doorway Vic Wertz stretched his long arms and sighed. "Good God, I'm hungry," he said. "All this shooting and killing really gives you an appetite." His voice was still half an octave high; the words were spoken too rapidly, and I saw Phil look at him and shake his head before he sat down again.

I was thinking about Laura Mason, and I wanted to see

her very much. But it was after one o'clock. I leaned toward Phil and whispered, "Are you going to try to get anything out of Rodel?"

Phil blinked and shrugged. Then he looked at me for a long time with his mild blue eyes. He said, "Are you feeling pretty pleased with yourself, Steve?"

I didn't answer, gazing back at him.

"Your gallant little vigilante group riding to capture the villain in the lair of the bad guys," he went on. "It's romantic, but vigilante groups aren't really a part of a democracy, are they? And presumably democracy is what you're working for?"

"Presumably," I said, and wished he hadn't got started on this.

"But you will say," Phil went on, in the same tone of gentle reproof, "that occasionally a man has to set himself above the methods of democracy in order to preserve them. And—"

"No, I won't either," I interrupted. "Because then you will say that Raile, Quaintance, Erika Gard, and others of their stamp feel they are doing the same thing. No, I merely acted the way I felt I had to act, without stopping to work out an ethic."

Phil lit an English Oval and blew smoke at me. "I'm feeling pretty uneasy about my part in this tonight," he said. "And about tomorrow. I just want you to feel a little guilty too."

"A man has a right to defend himself from oppression," I said. "Hasn't he? Well, America Incorporated has murdered Billy Farrell and his wife, burned my boat, and tried to murder me; and it's trying to gain a position where it can oppress me, and others, with more authority. Therefore I've been acting to defend myself."

Phil just looked at me, with his English Oval raising a thin straight pencil of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Now I've got to go rouse the law of the land out of his slumbers," I said. There was a house phone on the wall near the door, and I got on it and finally woke the manager and

got him to give me an outside line and the phone number of B. J. Oster. At Oster's number another sleepy voice, feminine, answered, and I asked to speak to the deputy.

"I'm sorry, but he's not back yet." There was the long whisper of a yawn in my ear. "Who is this calling, please?"

I told Mrs. Oster my name and number and asked her to have the deputy call me as soon as he returned. I hung up and sat down again. Phil was still watching me.

"All right," I said angrily. "I'm not happy about the way things have had to be handled, if it makes you feel any better. It doesn't please me either that tomorrow I have to bust in on a political meeting with my gang of bully boys and a hostage and make melodramatic announcements. But can you think of a more effective way?"

"No," Phil said, and flicked ashes from his cigarette. "And how do you feel about what's going to come after tomorrow?"

"You guess."

"But you'll go through with it?"

I got out my pipe and bit on it; it was stopped up. I sat there, chewing on the bit.

"You've always shied away from publicity," Phil said, leaning toward me. His eyes were suddenly harder than I had ever seen them before. "This time you can't. You've taken on a terrific responsibility. I hold you responsible to me, for one thing; if I'm going to be fired for my part in this affair—and I well may be—I want to be damn sure you're going to lay yourself on the line to squeeze everything possible out of what we're doing. Do you understand me?"

"Did you think I was going to back out now?"

"You're going to want to later. And if you do—"

"You ought to learn to trust your friends," I said.

He stared at me. Then he smiled a little. "All right," he said.

Vic Wertz looked over his shoulder at us again. "Where did this Roney play football, do you know, Steve? I've seen a lot of ball games, and I was wondering—"

Phil swung around toward him. "Mr. Wertz," he said sharply, "think about it this way. You saved our lives. A gunman was trying his best to kill us, and you shot him just in time. If you hadn't, my men would have, but they probably would have been a little late."

Vic said, "Yeah, well I was just—" he stopped and turned back to resume watching Rodel. I got up and went to the phone again, started to raise the receiver, looked at my watch, which said one-fifteen, and knew it was too late to call. But they would be worried about me.

"Nervous, Steve?" Phil said.

"There's somebody I ought to see."

"I expect the two of us can hold down the fort."

"All right, I think I'll go. I won't be long. If the deputy sheriff calls, say I'll call him back and that it's important." I went outside to my car and drove the three miles to Helios Beach. There were few cars on the highway now, and Helios Beach was dark, silent, and asleep, except for the hotel. The first floor was ablaze with lights; there were a great many cars parked in front of it; and as I turned up the hill I could see the activity in the lobby.

The big grey house at the top of the hill was darkened and asleep like its neighbours, with only the yellow light over the big door burning. Parked in the courtyard were the Lincoln and Laura's Oldsmobile; Quaintance would be at the hotel, and the MG still impounded. I wondered if I expected Laura to be waiting for me, waiting to hear me tell of riding the bicycle not merely no-hands but still more daringly—to look up at me, big-eyed, and think how heroic I was, like Colonel Richard Emlyn Mason. As I stopped the car, with a sudden savage gesture I took from my pocket my pipe, the only old friend of a broken-in pipe I had left since the *Marina* burned, and flung it out the window.

I got out and started around the house toward the back passage into the patio, where her room was. There was no George Roney to worry about now as I moved along under the balcony, up the path along the north side of the house, through the tool shed. The floodlights were on, and the patio

seemed like a pool of light in the darkness, and the swimming pool, too, gleamed with underwater lights. Two figures in white robes sat in the canvas chairs across the pool from me. In the robes, Dick and Laura looked as though they belonged to some strange order of monks; as I watched them from the tool-shed door I felt a loneliness and something else, like a huge weight on the back of my tongue, and I realized that in a very few days the two of them had become dearer to me than anything else in the world.

I started across the patio into the light. "Hey!" Dick said. "Steve!" Laura cried, and sprang up. She ran around the end of the pool toward me. She ran into my arms and held her arms around me tight and hard. "Oh, God!" she whispered in a trembling voice. "I was so afraid. I thought—I thought they might have killed you."

I was staring down at her hair. She had cut it off, and it was almost as short as a man's. She had not even done a good job. The blonde hair was slightly damp and clung to her skull but I could see the evidence of hasty hacking with the scissors. "Your hair," I said.

Her face was a kind of tight mask, fierce or frightened. She whispered, "I just got sick of it, so I cut it off." Then her voice was so low it was almost inaudible. "Daddy always liked it long."

Dick came up. He pumped my hand up and down. "Long day," he said. "Long night, for Christ's sake! Hey, we thought maybe they'd strung you up, man!"

We walked back toward where they had been sitting. I felt at once a kind of peace and a detachment, as though from a vantage point on the roof I was looking down on the three of us—Steve Summers in the middle in a rumpled old tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, a dirty bandage around his head; and the figures in the white terry-cloth robes on either side of him, his right arm around Laura Mason, his left hand on Dick Mason's shoulder. He looked happy.

Dick brought up a beach chair for me, and we sat down. Then Dick got to his feet again. "How about a drink? Shall

I go make us a drink?"

"Not for me, thanks, Dick," I said.

"Nor me. Thanks," Laura said. She held my hand tightly.

"Okay, hell with it," Dick said. "Jesus, it's good to see you, Steve. Hey, how do you like the crazy crew cut?"

"I like it."

Laura wouldn't look at me. Her face was turned away; I couldn't see her expression.

"You can have it," Dick said. "I blew my stack when I saw what she'd done. Women! But I guess they all have to look like these sexy Italian movie stars now."

"Where's Quaintance?" I asked.

"He's not here," Dick said quickly.

"I think he must be down at the hotel," Laura said. "They're getting the TV ready to go or something. Edie's upstairs full of sleeping tablets. Everyone's awfully—nervous."

"Nervous," Dick said, nodding. They both did seem very nervous, their voices high, the words spoken too fast, and Dick was having trouble sitting still.

"Quaintance will be arrested tomorrow," I said.

"Oh!" Dick said. "Say, really?"

"Oh, that's *good* Steve," Laura said, and I could feel her shivering.

"I've got enough evidence now," I said. "And I think enough to do America Incorporated quite a lot of harm—I hope, irreparably."

Dick was staring at me, his black bar of eyebrows drawn together, his lips tightly compressed. Suddenly, as I viewed us from my rooftop, the three of us reminded me of a marijuana party, with emotions changing momentarily from gaiety to gloom, with little things terrible meaningful and the important of no importance, with everything strange and moving fast, and voices sounding like a 33 1/3 RPM record played on 45.

I shook my head to try to get the strangeness out of it. I said, "I want both of you to come to the opening of the convention tomorrow morning."

"Sure," Dick said. "Front row. We'll be there."

"I'm hungry," Laura said abruptly. "Are you hungry, Steve?"

"Hey, me too!" Dick said. "I'll bet there's some ham left in the refrig, Laura."

"I'll go make some sandwiches," Laura said, and got up and hurried into the dark house. Lights came on in the kitchen.

With Laura gone, Dick fell into a brown study. He lay limply in his beach chair, his legs spread out, his arms hanging down. "We were sure worried about you," he said once in a shaky voice. "Not knowing where you were all day like that."

Laura returned with the sandwiches, thick slabs of ham between buttered slices of bread. We wolfed them in silence.

"Good!" Dick said, wiping his hands on his robe.

Laura said in a muffled voice, "Dick, will you please get the hell out of here?"

"Oh," Dick said. "Pardon me all to hell. Aren't you supposed to give me a quarter, though, Steve?"

I grinned back at him; it felt just as stiff and embarrassed as his grin looked. "Well, good night," he said, and, pulling the white robe tight around him, went across the patio to his room.

Quickly Laura rose and knelt beside my chair. When I kissed her, her lips were very warm, and she put her hands to my cheeks to hold my face against hers. She was shivering again.

Then she got up. "Let's go inside. I'm cold."

We went, arm in arm, toward the door into the living room. I said, and immediately regretted it as sounding paternal, "You shouldn't swim so late and then sit around in the cold air."

She made a strange half-laughing, half-crying sound; it was a bitter sound. In front of the huge windows we stood looking at the lights—the occasional fast-moving lights on the highway, the blaze of them at the hotel, the single distant light burning at the end of the pier. And I could see car headlights in the parking lot above the pier.

Laura said, "Steve, if—when you arrest Quaintance tomorrow, is there any chance he might not be convicted?"

"I suppose there's always a chance."

She changed the subject abruptly. "I have to know something. Because I felt it so strongly and it was the first time I've ever felt anything like it. I thought—I thought you were—Steve, were you in some horrible danger tonight?"

"A little," I said.

"I knew!" she said in a fierce, triumphant voice. She was shivering more violently now. "I knew," she whispered.

We stood there together. I stared out at the ocean, toward the horizon where darkness met darkness, and wondered how far it was, how far I could see from here.

Laura whispered, "Steve Summers," and seemed not to be calling for my attention but merely remarking on the name. But then she pressed herself against me and, when I kissed her, turned her head aside impatiently. I ran my hand over her chopped-off hair and wished she hadn't done it and was vastly glad she had.

"Steve," she said, her face still turned away, "I'm twenty-two. Steve—" She made the half-laughing, half-crying sound again, but it was not bitter now. "I'm a big girl now. Steve, please—"

I put my arms around her beneath her robe and felt her shivering. She held herself off for a moment, then pressed herself against me again, leg and thigh and breast, hard and then harder still. "Ah!" she whispered and pulled me back with her. "Ah—over here. Oh, yes! Oh, over here—please!"

And, as she had said, she was a big girl now.

2

I phoned the deputy's house again from an all-night service station in Crown Bay. After the number had rung many times Mrs. Oster's sleepy voice answered.

"No, he's not back yet," she said. "I guess he's still down at the pier. If you—"

I felt my heart beat suddenly like a hammer blow. I hung up and got into my car and was back in Helios Beach in about three minutes, turning down past the lights of the hotel where the TV people were getting ready for the morning, and on down toward the beach and the pier, where I could see the lights I had already seen from the windows of the Mason house.

I parked in the gravelled parking area above the lifeguard stand. There were eight or ten other cars in the lot, and the lifeguards' blue-panelled truck with the red cross on the side was nosed against the entry to the pier. Quite a way over to the left was a long Cadillac convertible with the top up; whitish in the night, it looked like Quaintance's car. The loud racketing of a heavy gasoline motor began—a generator on a trailer behind a pickup truck. Two cables led out on to the pier, where floodlights blazed down on the water and the beach. Several people were leaning on the pier railing, like black paper cutouts against the light.

I ran out on the pier. Below on the sand fifteen or twenty more people stood in a rough circle around something wrapped in a blanket. Four lifeguards were endeavouring to slide a white whaleboat on to a trailer behind a beach wagon. I saw Oster; he was barefooted, and his pants legs were rolled up to his knees. Behind me the sound of a generator ceased for a moment, then began again.

I hurried down the steps to the beach and through the soft, foot-slowng sand toward the people who stood around the blanket-wrapped body. Oster was leaning over, squeezing water from the rolled legs of his trousers. He saw me and straightened up. In the white lights hung on the pier his face was sharply etched with shadows.

"Who is it?" I demanded.

He gave me a tired, humourless grin and beckoned me after him as he stepped over toward the body. He pulled the blanket loose where it was tucked under the head, and flipped it back from the face. I looked at the blonde hair plastered down, the face grey with death and no longer handsome, the deep bloodless scratches and wounds on the

side of the head, the lacerated, greyish-red meat of shoulder and chest. Oster covered the body again and stepped back, scowling at the people who had crowded closer.

"We just got him in about two minutes ago," he said. He wiped his hands on his shirt front with a momentary expression of revulsion. "Right in under the pier. We've been beating the water in under there for a couple of hours almost, but he just floated in right past us. He's a mess, isn't he?"

One of the lifeguards came over from the whaleboat, which was now loaded on the two-wheeled trailer. "Haven't you got a stretcher up in your wagon, Smitty?" the deputy said. The lifeguard, whose teeth were chattering and whose brown skin was rough with goose pimples, nodded and trotted toward the steps to the pier.

I stood staring at Quaintance's body; wrapped in the grey blanket, he looked much taller than I remembered him.

"What happened?" I said, and as I spoke the popping of the generator ceased again, and the words seemed very loud in the silence.

"He jumped," Oster said. He fished a cigarette out of the pack in his pocket and put it between his lips. It took him several tries, and he had to turn his back on the ocean and cup his hands over his lighter to get a light. He jerked his head at me, and we moved away from the people gawking down at the dead man under the blanket. Out of their hearing, Oster said again, "He jumped," and looked at me as though he expected me to argue with him.

"Four witnesses," Oster said and held up four fingers. "So far. I wouldn't be surprised if more turned up—not that it matters." He craned his neck to look up at the pier. "They're still there—those two kids the farthest out. They're holding hands. See them?"

I said I saw them.

"They were sitting in their car, necking, I guess. They saw him. And an old couple from Escondido; they were the ones that phoned. They've gone home. It was about half-past eleven. He parked his car up there on the lot and walked

out on the pier, as calm as you please, and took off his coat—his name's in his coat and the description checked, was how we knew who it was before we found him—and jumped. They all saw him in the light there at the end."

He gave me the suspicious look again, as though he still expected an objection. "Go up and talk to those kids if you want to," he said. "The boy feels pretty bad because he didn't go right out after him—the girl wouldn't let him. If he had we probably would have had to be looking for the two of them. It's rough as the devil out there." Then he put his hand on my shoulder sympathetically. "Maybe it was better this way," he said. "You know? I don't know what else you were going to turn up against him, but so far it was pretty thin. Maybe it's better this way, huh?"

He turned as the lifeguard came back with the canvas-and-aluminium stretcher on his shoulder. I moved away, back to the stairs, and up them on to the pier. I could feel it shaking gently beneath my feet as the endless waves rolled in from across the world. I leaned on the railing with the others, watching as the long, stark shape in the grey blanket was loaded on to the stretcher. The four lifeguards carried the stretcher toward the steps up to the pier, with Oster walking behind them.

The young couple he had pointed out walked past me slowly, and then more quickly as they hurried to get off the pier before the lifeguards with their burden came along. I didn't speak to them. The gasoline engine of the generator shattered the silence again, its rapid, sharp explosions sounding like an echo of the roar of George Roney's machine pistol.

When they had taken the body away in the lifeguards' wagon I moved slowly back to my car. I didn't feel dazed any more, only hugely sick. My shoes grated harshly on the gravel, and I looked up at the black sky where no star showed—and no moon; only the harsh, white, man-made light behind me, and the frenetic mechanical popping of the gasoline engine. "It doesn't make any difference." I said it aloud. It didn't make any difference now. There was only

the larger picture now; in it only a few minor rearrangements to be made, an adjustment here, a notation there, a little editing. I told myself over and over that it didn't make any difference in the larger picture—like a kind of litany—as I got into my car and started it. Now to go back to the motel to plot with Phil about tomorrow.

Behind me the generator died again, and I could hear the waves slashing ruthlessly in along the pier.

3

In the kitchen of the hotel I stood close to the swinging door with the brass kickplate at the bottom, and, through its small, eye-level window, watched the people listening to Admiral Miles's opening address. All the well-dressed, well-fed, worried, respectable-looking people—there must have been four hundred of them, seated on rows of folding chairs in the huge dining room and the lobby behind it. They were predominantly women, but there were many men too. Almost every one of them wore on a lapel or pinned to a shoulder a large white badge from which depended three ends of ribbon—red, white, and blue. The badges were not sinister devices; on them were no swastikas or fasces or hammers and sickles, but only the name of the wearer and the name of the city or town from which he came. Through the little window I could not see Admiral Miles, nor any of the others on the rostrum, and I could see only one of the TV cameras, which was on a bunting-draped platform toward the rear of the room.

More and more I was beginning to wonder if I had the courage to face that camera, and the other, which must be on the rostrum itself, and to face those four hundred or so more immediate people—or even to move through this door with my ridiculous little troupe, to make an ass of myself in an attempt at a beer-hall *putsch* before all the respectable people listening calmly to Admiral Miles.

Behind me, leaning against a chrome-topped counter, was

Vic Wertz. One of his big hands was wrapped around Rodel's arm, his face was damp with sweat, and he was watching me with a curious blank stare. Rodel gazed at nothing with his deep-set, heavily circled eyes. Once in a while his lips moved in some incantation or prayer or curse, but so far as I knew he had spoken not a word aloud since Phil and I had burst in on him the night before. In his white shirt, with his hands folded together, his head held high, and a stubble of greyish whiskers on his cheeks and jaw, he had a Sidney Carton-ish look.

"We going in as soon as this guy finishes?" Vic whispered, although there was no need to whisper.

I nodded.

"He sounds like he's going to go on talking for a while. There's Brainerd!"

I saw Phil's face fleetingly at the little window; the door opened, and he ducked through. He was grinning.

"I think I've got an entry fixed," he whispered, with a glance at Rodel. "Also some support. Can you hear what's being said?"

"Not very clearly."

"You'll hear the applause when he's through. I'll tap on the door when you're to make your entrance. Better to leave Rodel here with Wertz until you need him, and I'll take a cue from you and tap again when Wertz is to bring him out. The rostrum is about six feet to the left, and you go up some steps. I don't think you'll have any trouble. Just be cool," he said, grinned again, wiped his face with a handkerchief, and ducked back out the door.

"I don't know what the hell he was talking about," Vic Wertz said. "You know, my nerves must be all gone—shot. Jesus, if I ever get through this day."

On the other side of the door the hoarse voice droned on.

There is no more terrible labour, mental or physical, than waiting, on the mark and set, with the minutes dragging past. But finally the applause started. When it stopped there was another voice—it must be that of Gordon Gregory introducing the next speaker. There was a sharp rap on the

door.

I pushed it open, slipped through, and started to the left, where I could see the rostrum, and Gordon Gregory in a tuxedo, standing before a bank of microphones; the television camera on the far side, with the cameraman behind it; the row of speakers in chairs at the rear of the rostrum. Raile was nearest me; next to him was the craggy profile of Ben Tyge, the Texas oil millionaire; then others, whose faces I couldn't see. On the wall behind them was an enormous American flag. My knees felt very weak as I started for the three steps to the rostrum. A hand caught my arm, and I jerked away, but it was Phil.

Gordon Gregory's voice resounded over the loudspeakers. ". . . and now a man who has something of interest to say to every member of America Incorporated, and to our radio and television audiences too." He paused and glanced toward where Phil and I were standing, below and to the left of the rostrum. "Uh—Mr. Stephen Summers!" he said, and his eyes in his handsome, florid face looked like fried eggs.

As I went up the steps Raile half rose from his chair, his mouth half open in his froglike face, as though he had just bitten into a mouthful of aspirin tablets. Beside him Tyge was frowning, puzzled. Then there were Admiral Miles, frowning; Senator Kettle, with his battleship's jaw and war-flag eyebrows; two others, also frowning—they must be Arvin and Duwart. In the last chair was Erika Gard, who looked dazed. Gordon Gregory gave me a wild simper of a smile, a hand like a wet fish to shake, and retreated. I looked toward the lens of the TV camera, and the realization of all the faces peering at me from behind that circle of glass was almost paralyzing. I gripped the lectern and gazed out at the audience. The four hundred faces staring back at me, the stirrings, the whispered demands as to who the hell was I, and the shushings, were paralyzing too. Then I saw to my left, in the front row, Dick and Laura, Laura white as paper, Dick leaning forward with his face screwed up terribly and his fists clenched in his lap.

I said, "I think all of you knew Russell Quaintance," and

stopped. My voice boomed back at me and sounded confident enough. The rhythm of "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" ran through my head. "At least by reputation," I went on. "Maybe a good many of you also know that Russell Quaintance killed himself last night—dived off the pier here in full view of at least four witnesses. His body was recovered early this morning."

There were muttered, shocked exclamations. Probably they thought there was going to be a request for a moment of silence for Russell Quaintance, the fair-haired bantam knight, the indomitable Red-fighter. I was sweating in the heat of the bank of lights staring down at me. I glanced at the round, shining ears of the microphones, at the TV camera like an enormous one-eyed metal head. The camera on the platform in the rear was fixed on me too. At the far right I could see Phil Brainerd, standing below the rostrum with one hand on the arm of Raile's chair. At the far left, Erika Gard's dazed look was gone; her fierce yellow eyes were unshuttered; her hand was in her purse. I knew what was in that purse, in her hand. I sweated under the hot lights.

In the audience, four or five rows from the front centre, I saw Edith Mason. She wore a black hat and a short black veil. She looked very beautiful and brave in her grief, with her chin up, her red mouth set. She must be here for Quaintance's sake. I addressed myself to her.

"Why did Russell Quaintance kill himself? I think it's a matter for all of you to reflect upon." I heard whispering behind me, but I didn't turn. I paused for a long time before I said, "Russell Quaintance killed himself because America Incorporated ordered him to"

I leaned on the lectern and stared back at them; back at Edith Mason; back at the grey-haired woman behind her, who had consternation and shock on her face; back at the distinguished-looking fattish man whispering to the person next to him while his white-rimmed eyes were turned toward me; at the young couple several rows behind Laura, who sat there with their mouths open; at Laura herself,

with her white face I didn't want to see. I waited for the buzzing to subside.

"That was not a figure of speech," I said. "You people belong to an organization of such fanatic discipline and purpose that it can order suicide, and be obeyed—or murder. Like the Communist party you've been tricked into thinking you are fighting."

This time the the buzz was louder. It was loud behind me too. "What the hell is this, Tom?" a voice demanded.

"Listen!" I said. "Listen, and I'll tell you why Russell Quaintance had to kill himself." The buzzing lessened. I tried to keep the faces before me from becoming a mass, to keep them individual. I addressed myself to a grey-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses, a row or two in front of Edith Mason. He looked sensible, and I hoped he was representative. "Listen!" I said, to the grey-haired man. "The organization you belong to but know so little about ordered a man murdered here in Helios Beach two weeks ago, on May twenty-first. That man's name was Farrell, and he died in among the piles of the pier, just as Quaintance did last night. Farrell had a fast little boat, and Quaintance had hired him to bring a man in illegally from Mexico. But Farrell found out who that man was and began blackmailing Quaintance, and America Incorporated decided that Farrell had to die. Since Quaintance had handled his job badly he was assigned to kill Farrell. But he did that badly too, and the evidence that would have convicted him is now in the hands of the sheriff."

I at least had the grey-haired man's full attention. His lips were slightly parted, and his tongue came out from time to time to wet them. I shifted my eyes to a matronly-looking woman with a rhinestone choker who sat farther back.

"And then there was Farrell's wife," I went on. "She knew that Quaintance had killed her husband, and maybe she knew too who the man was that had been brought in from Mexico. So night before last she was murdered too—run down from behind on a dark street by a stolen car."

The buzzing started again; now it had a slightly different tone. I could feel the eyes on my back like dull knives, pushing, and it was all I could do to keep from turning to glance at Erika Gard and the purse in her lap.

I did a half-turn toward the television camera. The Cyclops eye jerked up to catch my face full on, and I felt again the immense pressure of all those uncountable eyes fixed on their TV screens. I raised my voice. "I can't prove that Quaintance killed Farrell's wife," I said. "I can't prove it—that must be a rare thing for you to hear. But I have some proof for you to see, and it's not a sheaf of documents waved in the air. It's the man America Incorporated hired Farrell to smuggle in from Mexico, where Quaintance had gone to consult him last year. The master mind behind America Incorporated—a subordinate, but Warren Raile is *his* subordinate. He was brought here to supervise this convention and what was to come after it, as he had previously been supervising your activities from Mexico. He's the puppet-master who's been pulling the strings to control your hates and your fears and even your loyalties." I swung toward Phil Brainerd, but he had already stepped away from Raile's chair, and just as I turned Vic Wertz thrust Rodel through the door from the kitchen. The buzzing rose into a violent sound as Vic guided him up on to the rostrum. I had a quick glimpse of Ben Tye's confused glower, of Senator Kettle's gaping, idiotic stare. Raile was slumped down in his chair as though the air had gone out of his upper body, which had collapsed on to the solid base of his belly. His face was greenish grey, and he looked physically ill with fear.

I turned back to the gleaming discs of the microphones. The great mechanical head of the TV camera bobbed as the cameraman slid it forward, the Cyclops eye focusing on Rodel.

"Major General Friedrich Rodel," I said, "late of Hitler's SS, later of Hitler's personal staff—one of the last out of the fatal bunker."

Rodel stood there, militarily erect, and I had to admire

his poise. Vic Wertz gripped his right arm. A trickle of sweat ran down the side of Rodel's stony face and dripped from his chin. I gripped the lectern tightly with my own sweating hands and looked out at the faces before me.

"And later still of East Germany," I said.

I gave them a long, silent moment to absorb it. Then, exulting, I began to see it hit face after face like a slap. But there was no sound at all.

"Is there an FBI man here?" I went on. "This man is in this country illegally. He's here for purposes of espionage and treason. He's here as the secret head of an organization with which he hopes to overthrow the government of this country—by force, if necessary. He is wanted by the government of West Germany, and by the governments of Venezuela and Brazil, where he has engaged in the same type of activity. He's an agent of Soviet Russia."

I glanced toward Phil Brainerd, but he didn't move from his post beside Raile's chair. A young man in a tan suit, who had been sitting in the front row, got up and trotted on to the rostrum. He took Rodel's left arm, and Vic Wertz quickly relinquished his grip on the right one.

"Just a moment," I said. "May I see your credentials?" Serious-faced, the young man took out his wallet and flipped it open with a practised motion. It struck me that this was pretty good theatre. "And I think Senator Kettle and Admiral Miles would like to see that," I said.

The young man presented his credentials to Senator Kettle and the admiral, who looked as though he were holding on to a 220-volt hot wire and trying not to show it. "Are you satisfied, Senator?" I asked.

"Yes," Senator Kettle whispered. "Yes," he said more loudly. His throat worked. Raile's hands clutched the arms of his chair; his eyes looked glazed. There was an awed murmur as the FBI man, holding Rodel's arm, led him off the rostrum. Vic Wertz hastily followed. Phil Brainerd gravely winked at me.

I watched the young FBI man escorting Rodel down the aisle, and the faces turning to stare. The TV camera on the

platform in the rear followed them all the way. Dick Mason and Laura were staring up at me, Laura with a hand to the side of her face, Dick leaning forward with a curious, agonized look. When he caught my eye, though, he raised a hand and grinned triumphantly.

I said into the microphones, "You incredible suckers! You thought you were an organization dedicated to chasing traitors. Instead you've been destroying men as loyal as yourselves. You thought you were dedicated to saving democracy and the Republic. Instead you've been tearing them apart. You thought you were the sworn enemies of world communism, but you've been faithfully doing its work for it."

My throat felt dry and sore, and now I was very frightened of Erika Gard and the gun in her grey purse. "Patriots!" I said, and I summoned into my voice all the contempt I could feel. "What patriots you are! How the men in the Kremlin must be laughing at you patriots—all you eminently respectable anti-Communists doing their work for them.

"Doing *their* work. For behind the great fiction that has been drummed into you—that you are such patriotic Red-fighters—on every issue with which you've concerned yourselves you've been following the Communist line. Destroying constitutional government for a tyranny of vigilantes. Establishing a private espionage system. Destroying the morale of the Army, the State Department, and the atomic-energy programme—how many of our top atomic scientists have resigned because of you?" I paused and wiped my hand over my mouth. "Can you see how they've tricked you into weakening our whole system of defence?" I went on. "That they would want you to encourage isolationism and withdraw all foreign aid, so that Europe and Asia would be left to them? That they rejoice when you discredit and weaken the administration just when it needs its strength the most? That when you preach fear and hate—"

There was a hoarse shout from my left. Simultaneously came a pain in my shoulder, as though it had been rammed

hard with a blunt iron bar; the harsh, reverberating crack of a shot; and a scream. I fell against the lectern, turning to see Erika Gard standing with a shiny little pistol held in both hands, close to her face, as she aimed it at me. Gordon Gregory, in the chair beside her, was cowering back; Laura Mason stood with her mouth open in the scream that still cut shrilly into my ears; and Dick Mason was jumping on to the rostrum with his long arms stretched out.

Dick fell on Erika Gard, and she collapsed like a framework of dry sticks. Her hands holding the pistol worked their way out from beneath his body like some kind of burrowing animal, but all at once they relaxed their grip, and the pistol fell free. One of the other speakers skipped forward and kicked it off the rostrum. I saw it all with remarkable clarity, but the humming in my ears grew stronger and stronger, and then the air got into the wound in my shoulder like a red-hot arrow.

"Steve!" Phil Brainerd put his arm around me as I staggered. His face shone with sweat and anxiety. "All right?" he whispered. "Come on, let's get to a doctor."

"Get a doctor up here." I backed away from the microphone. "Get a doctor up here!" I whispered to him. "Let me finish. It's just in my shoulder. I'm all right. Now I've got the authority of just having been shot."

I moved back and caught hold of the lectern. The wound in my arm didn't seem to be bleeding much. But then this wasn't colour television anyway, was it? I felt a little hysterical. People were standing. Dick Mason had climbed off the rostrum and stood next to Laura. Two men were carrying Erika Gard off. A man in the front row was holding the little pistol up and away from him as though it were a dead rattlesnake. I saw the deputy, Oster, moving through the crowd to get it from him.

Phil Brainerd leaned over my shoulder. His voice roared from the loudspeakers. "We need a doctor up here!"

I said, "And when they can't fool you any more then they start to shoot." But the hubbub was too great, and I couldn't even hear my own voice.

A dapper man with a moustache came hurrying up the centre aisle and vaulted on to the speaker's platform. He helped me off with my coat. My shirt sleeve was soaked with blood. With a quick twist of his hands he ripped the shirt sleeve loose at the shoulder seam, jerked it clear off, and mopped my arm with it. A little mouth the size of a pencil-section drooled bright blood. The doctor rolled the sleeve into a tight ball, stuck it in my armpit, and pulled my arm down tight against it; with the pressure in my armpit the bleeding ceased.

"Just hold it like that," the doctor said.

Gordon Gregory suddenly appeared and shouted into the microphones, "Quiet! Quiet, please! Mr. Summers wishes to continue. Please, ladies and gentlemen!" He waved his arms at them.

The noise began to subside, the people to reseal themselves. I hung on to the lectern and felt sweat like ice-water on my forehead. Faces faded into white blurs, and the blurs slid together. I stood up straighter and shook my head to clear it. A woman was hurrying up the aisle with a little brown bag, which she handed to the doctor. Finally there was silence.

"Let me tell you about Rodel and the people like him, and how communism has been working through the neo-fascist parties," I said. My voice sounded very high, and I tried to tone it down. "They've been doing this in Europe for years now—in Germany and Italy and France. Putting men and money into far-Right splinter groups, they've been able to use violent anti-Communists to help them weaken the central coalition—just as in Hitler's early days the far Right and far Left worked together to undermine the centre. And later there is evidence to the effect that the Communists wanted him to take power, as he did, to destroy Germany, as he did—so that they could get control of Germany, as they have—of half of it."

I took a deep breath and tried to force the whitish blurs apart again. Now the story of Rodel. "Rodel was captured by the Russian Army," I said. "He became a Communist.

He was assigned to start the National Revival Party in West Germany—you've heard of that, if you read the papers. The old diehard ex-Nazis flocked to it—" I stopped, clinging almost desperately now to the lectern. There was so much to tell; it was so complex; but it had to be told. I tried to sort it out in my mind so I could go on—all the mass of treachery and double-dealing, and yet of singlemindedness, that Phil had told me about the day before and gone over for me early that morning. There was the powerful, deceptive surge of the National Revival Party until Basinov fled to the West and his revelations of who was backing the National Revival Party had forced it to dissolve and Rodel to flee to South America, where he had started work again. But the German Solidarity Party had formed to replace the National Revival Party in West Germany, and the other ex-SS Major General—what was his name? Uhlen. And there was that strange organization centred in the Otto Roth Export Company, an information-disseminating centre for fascist groups throughout the world, with a private wire to the Kremlin. And I must mention Italy, where the close co-operation of the far Right with the Communists had actually brought down a government and was threatening to do so again. And France too—all these, so they could see how it had worked; and then on to the gradual encroachment of the same schemes in America. There was so much of it. I leaned helplessly on the lectern. I saw a very tall man coming up the aisle toward me.

I felt a hand on my arm. "Steve," Phil said gently. "You've done all you could, and here's someone who knows the rest of it a lot better than either of us."

I stared out at the white blurs of faces and felt the sweat running down my face and knew I was through. As the tall man came up on the rostrum I backed away from the lectern. I tried to smile apologetically. The dapper doctor took hold of my good arm. "We'd better get you in a horizontal position, I think."

I saw Phil whispering to Gordon Gregory. With the doctor holding my arm, I moved to the left along the plat-

form. It seemed very far. We passed the tall man, who had a bald, brown, freckled head. We passed Senator Kettle and Admiral Miles, Tyge and Raile. The doctor helped me down the steps. My shoulder throbbed, and my knees felt dangerously weak.

We went down the aisle. Close now, the faces were staring at me. On the other side of the room people had risen to watch me leave. There were no cheers, no hand-claps, nor were there hisses or boos; there were only the steady stares I could not read. Gordon Gregory's voice was blaring from the loudspeakers: ". . . Colonel Edward Peach of the Central Intelligence Agency." He was a man who should be able to tell them the rest of it. I didn't hear any more above the increasing humming in my ears, and I knew my knees were going to go, and all at once they felt like wet straws, and I pitched forward with everything blurred and white and whirling. I felt the doctor try to catch me, but he wasn't strong enough.

six

I

The doctor finished taping a gauze pad to my shoulder, and I watched while he repacked his bag. He picked up the .25 slug from the table beside the bed. "Did you want to keep this, Mr. Summers?"

I shook my head. "Not particularly."

"I'd like it for a souvenir if you don't—"

"You're welcome to it."

"Thanks." He tossed the bullet up, caught it, and put it in his watch pocket. As he got to his feet there was a knock, and the stocky FBI man got up to open the door. Phil Brainerd and the tall man with the bald brown head came in. The talking in the hall was louder with the door open; someone yelled, "Hey, how about a couple of shots, Summers?"

I thought of the photographers in the hall, and the reporters—the reporters and photographers down the days from now on. I tried not to flinch at the prospect.

Phil said to the stocky man, "Clear those ghouls out of there. Tell them they're to stay down in the lobby, and see that they do."

The FBI man and the doctor left. The tall man moved over toward the bed. He had a great rocky outcropping of a nose and a lantern jaw. "Steve, this is Colonel Peach of Central Intelligence," Phil said. "He's been in La Jolla on vacation and luckily showed up here this morning."

"Wouldn't have missed it," Colonel Peach said.

I sat up on the bed to shake his hand. My left arm was still numb from the local; my head felt a little light. Colonel Peach frowned.

"Lie down, man! You don't have to sit up for me."

"Just testing," I said, but I lay back down again. Phil swung a chair around and sat facing me over its back. Colonel Peach seated himself on the foot of the bed, took out a huge pipe, and lit it. The tobacco smelled good.

"I'm foggy about a few things," I said to Phil. "How did you get Gordon Gregory to introduce me?"

"Oh, we had a little talk," Phil said and smiled. "I spent quite a busy time just before the convention started, talking to Gregory—and then I ran into the colonel and had to fill him in. By the way, we have Raile under arrest too. Gard's in the hospital with a broken hip—under arrest too. The local deputy arrested her, and we'll let it stay that way until we look into all this some more. And the colonel finished off for you a lot better than you could have done with the information I'd given you."

"I think we gave them some meat to chew on," Colonel Peach said and drew on his pipe. "Yes, I think, all in all, the whole morning was very effective—melodramatic, perhaps, but they seem to favour that on television. There was certainly movement, dash and colour. Didn't you think it was effective, Brainerd?"

"I thought so," Phil said.

The colonel's face broke into a broad, gap-toothed grin. "I thought Mr. Summers looked very much like the drummer boy in the 'Spirit of Seventy-Six,'" he said and laughed and slapped his knee. "That bandage round his head, the bleeding arm, the Colours for a backdrop. And then that wonderfully dramatic moment when he fell. There was a blonde young lady we could scarcely pry away from you, Summers—weeping bitterly. Very pretty girl."

"I don't think we need to puff him up any more," Phil said. His tone was joking, but his mild blue eyes were not.

"A bit more," Colonel Peach said, and his face grew serious too. "Mr. Summers, I can't say I approve of your methods, and I must disapprove of the fact that we or the Bureau were not called in earlier, but I think your country may have great reason to be grateful to you."

I didn't say anything. I felt Phil watching me steadily.

"I know you have only performed what you felt to be your duty," Colonel Peach went on. "But I wonder if you realise the further duties you have incurred."

"We've discussed it a little," Phil said.

"I said 'duties,'" Colonel Peach said, rubbing the bowl of his pipe along the side of his nose. "There are some that will of course be required of you—such police matters as a reopening of the investigation into the murder of this man Farrell and the inquest on his wife's death. And Brainerd mentioned a shooting last night, about which the Los Angeles police may have to be satisfied."

He clapped his pipe between his teeth with a decisive motion, drew, blew out a cloud of aromatic smoke, and said, "And beyond a doubt there will be a Congressional investigation into America Incorporated, at which you will be obliged to testify. These are all duties you cannot get out of. But there are others."

I nodded and thought of a dream I had had last night, when for a time the end had seemed near and clear and definite—of a new boat, a replica of the *Marina*; of Laura, not Mason but Summers, in the galley and taking turns at the wheel; and maybe, during the summer months when college was out, Dick helping me with the lines strung off the outriggers on a fishing trip to Baja California. Now the picture seemed sickeningly sweet and sentimental.

"You are a hero of—How shall I put it?" the colonel went on. His eyes were a piercing grey. "Of the centre. Of the levelheads of the centre. The centre has had no heroes for a long time, Mr. Summers—no men-of-action heroes. Your duty is to make the most for the levelheads you can out of your heroism. For a time, for some time, I'm afraid—afraid, I say, for your sake; personally I must hope it is a long and fruitful time—your life will not be your own. You must seek publicity. You must never dodge it. You must appear on television and radio programmes and be prepared to do your best for us on them. You must answer reporters' endless and frequently double-edged questions,

pose for endless photographs, make speeches before interested groups, write articles for magazines and Sunday supplements. And you must do, too, as much as you can to remain newsworthy, for the sake of the levelheads.

"And all this time you will be enduring vilification and fulsome praise; you will be a centre of controversy. Any slip you make or have ever made will be played up *ad nauseum*; terrible canards will be told of you; your past will be dredged into and mercilessly exposed; acquaintances will be induced to lie about you; people close to you will be threatened and extorted; you will receive poison-pen letters and threats by mail and telephone; you will need to be under constant surveillance by us in case there is an actual attempt on your life—all that, Mr. Summers. I am both telling you that you must be ready to go through all this, and begging you not to falter."

"He'll love it," Phil said. "He's always been a publicity hound." He gave me a sad, sympathetic smile.

"And in return, really, nothing but your own satisfaction," Colonel Peach said. "It isn't very much."

"It's something," I said.

He nodded and looked down into the bowl of his pipe, which had gone out. He put it in his pocket. "Well, I don't envy you, Mr. Summers."

Phil said, "He'll do well. I think. It's pretty important that he does."

"Yes," Colonel Peach said. "It is pretty important." He sat in silence for a moment, apparently sunk in unhappy considerations. Then he said, "Well, Summers, there are a great many newspaper people clamouring for you downstairs. Do you feel up to seeing them? Or would you like to have a little time to yourself first?"

"A little time," I said. "If you don't mind I'd like to see the blonde young lady who was weeping so bitterly. That's Laura Mason, Phil, and I'd like to see her brother too. I think they'll both still be here."

"And her brother too?" Colonel Peach said. "Good heavens! Well, see if you can find them, will you, Brainerd?"

Anything for the fatted calf, isn't it?"

Phil got up. "By the way," he said, "Farrell's little girl didn't have anything, but he'd checked an envelope at the hospital to be opened in the event of his death. There'd been a picture of Rodel in *Time* three or four years ago when it looked like the National Revival Party was going to swing a lot more votes than it did, and Farrell had evidently remembered the face and looked the issue up. Anyway, he had a picture of Rodel, and there was a letter implicating Quaintance. It may be of some help."

"Farrell was a little more efficient than your identification system, wasn't he?" I said, and Phil grinned and went out. I lay there looking at the ceiling, and presently Colonel Peach harrumphed and rose.

"Well, there's a man in the hall so you won't be bothered, Summers," he said, "until you're ready to be bothered." He left too, and I was alone.

I sat up on the bed and waited until my head came to rest. I could see the ocean from the window, dark, very dark, with flashes of sun on the swells and the surf foaming in along the tall, dark-mossed piles of the pier. Farrell had died in among those piles, and Quaintance; the beginning and the end, but not the end. The pier had a kind of grotesque, frail beauty in the sun, but I couldn't bear to look at it any more.

There was a soft knock. I waited, staring out at the dark blue of the ocean stretching out toward the horizon, where a low reef of clouds hung. There was another knock, a little louder. "Steve?" Laura Mason called.

"Come in," I said.

Laura entered with Dick behind her. They both looked a little frightened. Laura was very beautiful with her soft red mouth, her brown eyes in which clearly there was anxiety for me. Her face seemed a little harder, a little older, without the wreath of blonde hair. She wore an off-white dress of raw silk, a single gold bracelet on her arm. I thought of last night, which was only eight or nine hours past and yet was a million miles away.

"Are you all right?" Laura asked quietly.

"Physically," I said. "Sit down, will you? Dick?" She sat down quickly on the chair Phil had vacated. Dick took the chair across the room and slouched down with his hands in his pockets.

I said, "Dick, you probably saved my life a little while ago."

"Forget it!"

I said to Laura, "Well, how did you like my act just now?" And I felt as bitter as the look I remembered on Warren Raile's face.

She smiled faintly; her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap. She stared into my eyes.

"Did you think everything came off?" I asked. "Like my explanation of Quaintance committing suicide?"

Laura said nothing. Dick gnawed at his lower lip, his face contorted into a terrible grimace.

"A little weak, wasn't it?" I said. "That part. But then it was a lie, and I don't like lying. Even for you," I said to Laura, and my voice shook. "Because he didn't commit suicide. You killed him. One of you." I glanced toward Dick. "Or was it both of you?"

Neither of them spoke. They both watched me with their brown eyes, Dick's light ones defiant, Laura's darker ones filling with tears. Neither of them moved, and it was as though I were gouging at the wound in my arm, hitting at the wound in my head, opening other wounds endlessly, to go on.

"The noble children," I said. "Quaintance had raked up something against the great Colonel Richard Emlyn Mason, hadn't he? Some dirt. But no dirt's to be smudged on that headstone, so you killed Russie. It must have been some time early last night. And you took him down to the beach about eleven-thirty—you, Dick, in your swimming trunks, and you dressed in his clothes," I said to Laura. "At least his coat. You'd just hacked your hair off, and in his coat and a pair of slacks you looked like a man, and you're the same size. Cut your hair because your father always liked

it long, you said." I wiped my hand across my mouth.

"So you walked out on the pier, knowing that in the light at the end the people in the cars in the parking lot would see you and later identify you as Quaintance. At the end you climbed up on the rail and jumped in and swam to the beach—you're a good swimmer aren't you? And Dick took Quaintance's body out on his surfboard and dumped it in among the piles. And then both of you went home and put on your white angel-robcs—where I found you."

Dick was looking at his hands. The tears leaked down Laura's face. She said in a firm, quiet voice, "He had some documents from the Defence Department—they had the Secretary of the Army's name on them. They were statements from soldiers saying that my father had turned traitor in the prison camp, that he'd given the Reds information about—oh, I don't know what it was, something technical—and that he was going to broadcast for the Reds, but some of the Americans in the camp managed to kill him before he could. Russic showed them to me. He said he was going to make them public if I didn't get rid of you and stop interfering with his affair with Edie." She bent her long hair she had cut off last night. Her hands remained there a moment, as though surprised, and then were lowered.

"We were in my room," she said. "My tennis racket was there, beside the door, with the press on it. It's a metal press. I picked it up and hit him with it as hard as I could."

"Now, wait," Dick said. "I did it as much as you—"

"Shut up, Dick," I said. I said to Laura, "But you knew the documents were a fake, didn't you?"

"I guess I did. But that didn't matter. He could still—" She stopped. After a moment she said, "It was that all at once he just seemed too rotten to live."

"He was, Steve!" Dick said. "A guy like that. You know he was!"

"Go on."

Laura's voice didn't break "Well, I called Dick. I didn't

know what to do, and he didn't know. But finally we worked it out—oh, just the way you said. It was about ten when it happened. Russie'd come up to the house to see if Edie wanted to go down to the hotel to meet Gordon Gregory and some other Hollywood people, but she'd gotten in a jealous fit because he hadn't come earlier, and she'd gone to bed. So he said he wanted to see me, and he brought these documents out to my room.

"Well, afterwards I cut my hair off and put on slacks and his coat, and Dick and I carried him around the house to his car. I drove my car, and Dick drove the Cadillac. I parked down at the south end of the parking lot there, and we rolled him down the embankment. Dick took him out on the board, and I drove the Cadillac up by the pier and walked out on the pier and jumped off and swam in—just the way you said. We got home half an hour or an hour—I don't know how long it was—before you came." The even, almost calm voice ceased.

"What're you going to do about it, Steve?" Dick asked hoarsely.

"Nothing."

The three of us sat there, the murderess and her accomplice and I, and the victim wasn't worth any of the misery and the loss. And yet he was. I wondered if he had been dead before Dick dumped him in among the piles. I began to sweat, thinking about it. I didn't want to know.

"Steve, listen," Dick said. "Another thing. We were so damn worried. We thought maybe they'd got you. We—I guess Laura—"

"My heart almost breaks at your devotion," I said. I saw Dick's jaw tighten, and he sat up very straight.

"Do you know," I said to Laura, "in the middle of everything awful, a mess of murder and treachery and lust for power, and fear, you were the only thing—well, I was very much in love with a twenty-two-year-old-girl." I wiped my hand across my lips again. Laura stared at me, and the tears streamed down her cheeks—but tears couldn't wash it away.

"It got to be a kind of dream," I said. "I didn't really believe it, that sort of dream, but it was a comforting one. How when all this was over I'd ask you to marry me, and you would, and I'd get a new boat, and we'd go for a long trip down along the coast of Mexico. There are some beautiful little bays down there where we could anchor—the water so clear you can see the bottom fifty feet down, and wonderful fish, and nobody to clutter up the landscape or bother you. That kind of dream.

"But it would be too dangerous," I said. "You might get mad at me. You might decide I was too rotten to live and hit me with a tennis racket. So that dream's gone where they all go."

"Oh!" Laura whispered and covered her face with her hands.

"That's pretty goddam cruel!" Dick burst out.

"Cruel to whom?" I said and closed my eyes for a moment. "Too rotten to live," I said to Laura. "You kill someone because they're too rotten to live. Who the hell do you think you are to decide who's too rotten to live?"

"Well, didn't you think so too?" Dick said.

"Not in such practical terms." When I looked at Laura I felt everything twist inside me. like a rusty bolt with the big wrench on it. "All right," I said. "I know it wasn't premeditated. But the practical, coldblooded way you two set out to dispose of him— Was he dead when you dumped him?"

"Yes," Laura whispered.

"Was he?" I said to Dick.

"Yes," Dick said sullenly. Then he said, "We tried his pulse for a long time, but he was dead."

We sat there, and the world turned, and Quaintance was dead, and probably now no one even cared how he had died. But I cared. "Well, you're probably safe," I said. "The assumption is death by drowning, unless someone raises a doubt. You're probably as safe as war bonds."

"Oh, Steve," Laura whispered into her hands.

"You act as though I ought to feel sorry for you," I said.

"Or congratulate you," I said to Dick. "But do you know what you've done to me? Even in the act of dying, Quaintance was able to corrupt, because you murdered him—and to corrupt me as well, because what's always mattered most to me is what I thought of myself. I was fighting them, and as best I could I was fighting cleanly. I hadn't let them force me into fighting dirty. I was," I insisted, to myself as much as to Dick and Laura. "I would have got him legitimately this morning. He would have been convicted, I think. But then you decided he was too rotten to live."

I stopped and stared out at the ocean. It was very beautiful, but always in the corner of my eye, the long, stick-legged structure of the pier intruded. "So to protect you I become a liar," I went on. "I stood up there this morning and told a big lie, and after that it was hard not to tell a few more little lies and over-simplifications—just to make everything neater and more concise. So I'm forced into a position where I'm fighting dirty, like them; where I disregard the means in view of the end, like them. So I'm corrupt now too—maybe not as much as they are, but to a degree. I don't think as much of myself as I did. You've done that—and more too. Because before this they couldn't touch me, they had nothing to hurt me with or scare me with. I was pretty well armoured; now I'm not. Now there's the big, ugly fact that Quaintance was murdered, not a suicide. That Laura Mason is a murderer and her brother her accomplice, and I have to cover for them. Now there's that to hang over my head. All that you've done," I said.

"Well, goddammit!" Dick said. "If you feel that way about us, go ahead and turn us in!"

"No," I said. "No, I can't. But I'm going to give you one piece of penance. And it had better be done."

Laura looked up with sick, streaming eyes.

"Farrell's daughter Mirrilees," I said. "The hospital for crippled children in Oakland, where she is, is expensive, but it's not expensive to rich kids like you. I want her taken care of for life."

"All right, Steve," Laura said.

"If there isn't any family anywhere I'll become her legal guardian," I said. "And I'll see to it that you support her. If you—"

"We'll do it, goddammit," Dick said. "Laura said we would."

I got up off the bed and stood there a moment to see if I was strong enough, thinking that now I must go down to where the reporters were waiting, now it began. "So good-bye," I said. I didn't look at Laura; I didn't want her to see my eyes. I stepped past her. "Goodbye," I said again. "I hope I can forget you both very rapidly."

"Hey, Steve—" Dick said, but I didn't look at him either. I opened the door and went out. I had forgotten my coat, but I couldn't turn back for it now, and anyway my bandaged shoulder would look better in the photographs.

"If you're her guardian and I'm taking care of her maybe I'll see you there some day," Laura said behind me, but I acted as though I hadn't heard. I went on down the hall, past the stocky FBI man, who nodded to me.

"All right?" he asked.

I nodded back. My legs felt very tired, and my head hurt, and my arm was coming unpleasantly back to life from the local anaesthetic, but I was all right—physically.

I went down the stairs. The lobby was packed with people. Over in the far corner I saw Senator Kettle talking to two reporters. I saw Vic Wertz. I saw Phil Brainerd and Colonel Peach; they started toward me. Over by the windows that overlooked the back terrace, sitting at a low table, was Edith Mason. She was slim and youthful-looking in black as she talked earnestly to a very handsome young reporter. He looked sympathetic and interested—and perhaps interested not merely in what she was saying. I saw her touch his arm and smile, and I felt a sudden fury—not that she should have forgotten her great love for Quintance so quickly, as I had known she would, but that she, of all of us, should have come out of this unscarred and with the future bright.

"There he is!" someone cried, and there was a surge to-

ward me as I came down into the lobby. Flashbulbs flared blindingly from cameras held high. A cameraman grasped my good arm.

"Hey, how about a shot of you and Wertz!" he cried. "Captain Atomic and his faithful aide—you know."

"Sure," I said, and Vic Wertz and I were jockeyed together, realigned so that my wounded arm would show, shot and reshot. I looked over toward Phil Brainerd and Colonel Peach. Phil winked gravely. The colonel nodded at me, sucking on his pipe.

"Another one, huh?" a photographer said, and I was jerked around roughly until I faced in the proper direction. The flash-bulb went off, and as the red glare faded out of my eyes I saw Laura and Dick descend the last of the stairs and blend with the crowd. I watched Dick's tall head move toward the door. I had one glimpse of Laura's cropped blonde hair before the two of them disappeared.

My arm was pulled again, this time by a reporter with a pad; his hat was turned up all around. "How about a statement, Mr. Summers? Tell us all about how . . ."